



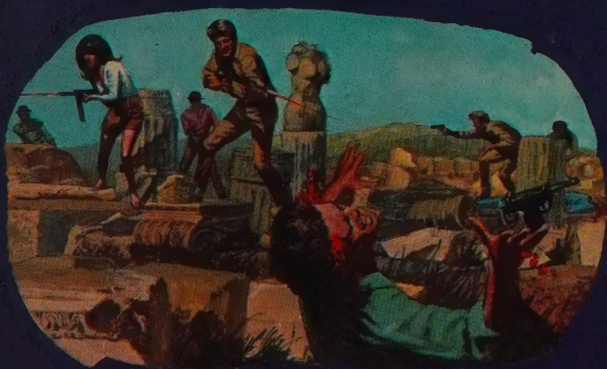
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*Dedicated to The Men of the
Secret Services of the
United States of America*

NICK CARTER

A Killmaster Spy Chiller

**ASSASSIN:
CODE NAME VULTURE**



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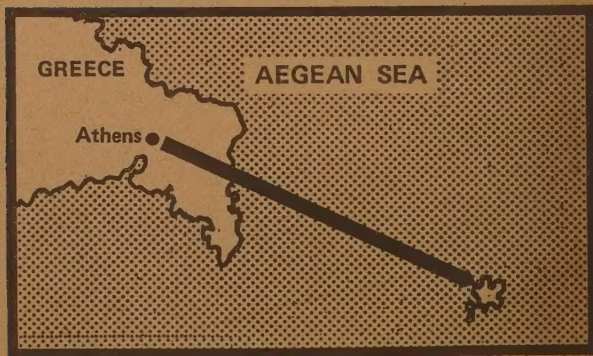
ASSASSIN: CODE NAME VULTURE



ATHENS/GREECE

- 1. Odeon Hotel
- 3. Apollo Building

- 2. Northern suburb
- 4. The House



AEGEAN SEA



ONE

I licked my parched lips with a thick tongue and squinted up at the sun overhead. There was a taste of old paper in my mouth and a dull but insistent buzzing in my ears.

There was no way of knowing exactly how long I had lain unconscious at the side of the small, scraggly thornbush. When I first came around, I couldn't remember where I was or how I had gotten there. Then I saw the twisted, gleaming hulk of the wreckage, the small Mooney aircraft that had fallen like a wounded hawk from the cloudless sky. The half-crushed strips of metal—remains of the violent crash—rose just thirty yards away above the brown grass of the veldt, and thin wisps of smoke still wafted skyward from it. I recalled now how I had been hurled from the plane as it hit the ground and then crawled away from the raging flames. I figured from the position of the sun that several hours had passed since the mid-morning crash.

Stiffly, and with much pain, I propped myself into a sitting position feeling the hot, white clay against my thighs through my torn khaki

trousers. The bush shirt I wore was stuck to my back, and the stink of my own body filled my nostrils. Holding a hand up to shade my eyes from the sun's glare, I looked out over the tall lion grass that seemed to extend endlessly in all directions, broken only by the occasional greenery of a lonely umbrella acacia. There was no sign of civilization, nothing but the vast sea of grass and trees.

A vulture moved silently overhead, wheeling and pirouetting. Casting its shadow on the ground before me, the bird hung there obtrusively, watching. The buzzing in my ears became more distinct now, and it occurred to me that it was not in my head after all. The sound came from the vicinity of the accident. It was the sound of flies.

I focused on the wreckage. Then the vulture and swarm of flies reminded me that Alexis Salomos had been with me on that plane—he had been piloting it when the trouble came. I squinted my eyes but couldn't see him anywhere near the wreck.

Rising weakly I found that my legs were rigid. My entire body ached, but there didn't seem to be any broken bones. A long cut on my left forearm was already healing, the blood caked dry. I regarded the smoldering wreckage darkly. I had to find Alexis to see if he had survived.

The buzzing of the flies became louder as I approached the plane's carcass. I leaned down and peered into the cockpit, but I couldn't spot my friend. My stomach felt queasy. Then as I was

walking around the front of the wreck, past a charred propeller and a crumpled piece of fuselage, I suddenly stopped.

Alexis' body lay in a grotesque, bloody heap about ten yards away. He had been thrown clear, too, but not before the plane had mashed him. The front of his head and face were caved in from impact with the windshield of the plane, and it looked as though his neck had been broken. His clothing had been ripped to shreds, and he was covered with caked-dry blood. Large brown flies covered his body crawling into all the crimson crevices. I started to turn away, a little nauseated, when I saw movement in the long grass behind the corpse. A spotted hyena was inching up, aware of my presence but too hungry to care. While its appearance was still registering in my brain, the hyena closed the small distance between itself and the body and grabbed at the exposed flesh of Alexis Salomos' side, savaging a piece off.

"Get away, damn you!" I shouted at the beast. I picked up a stick of burnt wood and flung it at the hyena. The animal loped away through the grass carrying the chunk in its bloody jaws. In a moment it was gone.

I stared down again at the twisted body. I didn't even have a shovel to bury it with so I had to leave it to be destroyed by scavengers within twenty-four hours.

Well, there was nothing I could do. Alexis Salomos was just as dead with or without a burial. They had finally caught up with him and

killed him, and they had almost gotten me, too. At least until this moment I had somehow survived. But the biggest test of my luck might just lie ahead, for I figured I was about halfway between Salisbury and Bulawayo, in the deepest part of the Rhodesian bush country.

I walked around the wreckage until it hid the corpse again. Just before the sabotaged Mooney had begun sputtering and coughing up there at five thousand feet, Salomos had mentioned that we would be passing over a tiny village soon. From what he had said, I calculated that the village was still fifty to seventy-five miles to the southwest. With no water or weapons my chances of getting there were very slim. The Luger and the sheath knife that I generally carried had been left at my hotel in Salisbury. Neither of them could be concealed beneath my bush shirt and, anyway, I had not foreseen the need for them on this particular plane ride to Bulawayo. I was on leave from my regular duties with AXE—America's super-secret intelligence agency—and had merely been accompanying an old friend from Athens whom I had met, quite by accident, in Salisbury. Now that friend was dead, and the wild story he had told me had become credible.

I walked to a nearby termite mound, a heap of hard white clay as high as my head with many chimneys that served as entrances. I leaned heavily against it, stared out toward a distant line of fever trees, and tried to ignore the buzzing of the flies on the other side of the

wreck. It was just three days ago that I had met Alexis Salomos at a small restaurant near the Pioneer Memorial Park in Salisbury. I was sitting on the terrace looking down on the city when Salomos was suddenly standing beside my table.

"Nick? Nick Carter?" he said, a slow smile starting on his handsome, swarthy face. He was a square-jawed, curly-haired man in his forties whose eyes looked steadily at you with a bright intensity, as if he could see secrets inside your head. He was a newspaper editor in Athens.

"Alexis," I said, rising to extend my hand. He took it with both hands and shook it vigorously, the smile broadening to match my own. "What the hell are you doing in Africa?"

The smile faded, and I realized for the first time that he looked different from the way I had remembered him. He had helped me ferret out a KGB man who had stolen documents important to the West a few years ago in Athens. He seemed to have aged considerably since then. His face had lost its healthy look, particularly around the eyes.

"Do you mind if I join you?" he asked.

"I'll be offended if you don't," I answered. "Please sit down. Waiter!" A white-aproned young man came to the table, and we both ordered a British ale. We made small talk until the drinks came and the waiter left, then Salomos fell pensive.

"Are you all right, Alexis?" I finally asked.

He smiled at me, but the smile was thin and taut. "I have had trouble, Nick."

"Anything I can do?"

He shrugged his square shoulders. "I doubt if there is anything anybody can do." He spoke good English but with a marked accent. He took a long swig of the ale.

"You want to tell me about it?" I asked. "Or is it too personal?"

He gave a bitter laugh. "Oh, it is personal, my friend. You might say it is extremely personal." His eyes met mine. "Someone is trying to kill me."

I watched his face. "Are you sure?"

A wry smile. "How sure must I be? In Athens a rifle shot breaks a window and misses my head by inches. So I take the hint. I take a vacation to see my cousin here in Salisbury. He is an import merchant who emigrated here ten years ago. I thought I would be safe here for awhile. Then, two days ago a black Mercedes almost struck me on the main boulevard. The driver, who drove up onto the curb, looked exactly like a man I had seen before in Athens."

"Do you know who the man is?"

"No," Salomos said, shaking his head slowly. "I had seen him coming from the Apollo Building recently when I was doing a little snooping there." He paused and stared at his ale. "Have you ever heard of the Apollo Lines?"

"An oil tanker company, isn't it?"

"That is correct, my friend. The biggest tanker line in the world which is owned by my countryman, Nikkor Minourkos."

"Oh, yes. I know of Minourkos. A billionaire

ex-sailor. A recluse; nobody ever sees him these days."

"Correct again," Salomos said. "Minourkos withdrew from public life almost ten years ago while still a relatively young man. He is believed to spend almost all his time in his penthouse in the Apollo Building near Constitution Plaza where he conducts his business. Personal contacts are made primarily by associates close to Minourkos. Almost no one ever obtains a personal audience with him."

"Very rich men seem to place a high value on their privacy," I said, sipping the ale. "But what does Minourkos have to do with the attempts on your life?"

Salomos took in a deep breath and let it out slowly. "About six months ago, Monourkos' behavior began to change. This was of particular interest to me, and other newspaper editors, of course, because any information about Minourkos is exciting and important to the readers of the *Athens Olympiad*. So I began taking notice when Minourkos, who has always stayed out of politics, began issuing public statements against the ruling junta in Athens. Suddenly he announced that the leaders among the colonels were weak and socialistic. He claimed they betrayed the 'revolution' of April 21, 1967, and implied that Greece would be better off with the restoration of Constantine II or some other monarchy. He referred to the danger of leftists like Papandreou and suggested

that there needs to be another 'shake-up' in Greek government."

"Well," I said, "the man has a right to grow a sudden interest in politics after all these years. Maybe he's bored with trying to spend his money."

"It seems to be going farther than that. A man like Minourkos can buy a lot of friends. Generals and colonels are seen going to and from his penthouse, but they won't talk about the visits to the press. And there are rumors of a private army being financed by Minourkos at a specially built camp in northern Greece and at one on Mykonos, an Aegean island.

"Lastly, there is the recent disappearance of Colonel Demetrius Rasion. A Minourkos-dominated newspaper concludes he drowned while boating at Piraeus, but his body was never found. Nikkor Minourkos is now starting a big campaign to have Rasion replaced with a man of his own choosing, a fascist named Despo Adelfia. The junta does not want Adelfia, but its new and genteel leaders are afraid of Minourkos and his friends on the staff of generals."

"An interesting situation," I acknowledged. "But do you think Minourkos is embarking on a terror campaign with ideas of a bloody *coup*?"

"Perhaps. But there are other possibilities. There are new faces that none of us newsmen have seen before coming and going from the penthouse atop the Apollo Building; Minourkos himself still stays in hiding. I did notice, how-

ever, that one of the new faces belongs to a Greek-American named Adrian Stavros."

My eyes narrowed slightly on Salomos. "Stavros in Athens?" I murmured slowly. "Keeping company with Minourkos?"

"It appears so. Unless—"

"Unless what?"

"Well. Since Minourkos' recent utterances have been so out of character, perhaps he himself has not been the source of them."

"A Stavros takeover of the Minourkos empire?"

"Perhaps against Minourkos' will," Salomos suggested. "Perhaps there has already been a small *coup*, a hidden one. Since Minourkos is so secretive and always deals through subordinates, it would be possible to kill or capture him and operate under his name, and spend his vast sums of money without anyone taking notice for a time. It was just after I implied such a theory in my editorial that the first attempt was made on my life in Athens."

The haunted look had returned to his eyes. I remembered the AXE file on Adrian Stavros and realized that he was capable of just such a maneuver. Stavros had spent his college years demonstrating with placards at Yale. Then he had become involved in a radical bombing of a CIA office, and later he had made an attempt on a senator's life. He had escaped the clutches of the FBI and the CIA and had buried himself somewhere in Brazil where he had graduated to big-time crime like smuggling and assassination.

Since the evidence against him in the States has been slim, the US had not tried to get him back. But they kept a watch over him in Brazil.

"And the man who tried to run you down here in Salisbury?" I asked. "You had seen him coming from the penthouse at the Apollo Building?"

"Yes, Nick," Salomos said. He swigged the rest of his ale and looked over the hibiscus-lined balustrade down the hill to the city. "I am getting desperate. A friend of my cousin who lives in the country outside Bulawayo has asked me to visit him for a short time until this blows over. I have accepted his invitation. A rented plane waits for me at the airport. I will fly it, since I am a licensed pilot, and will enjoy the trip. That is, if I can forget about—" There was a brief silence, then he looked over at me. "Nick, I would be very grateful if you could accompany me to Bulawayo."

I knew that Alexis Salomos would not ask if he were not desperate with fear. And I still had several days leave left before I received another assignment from David Hawk, the enigmatic director of AXE.

"I've always wanted to see Bulawayo," I said.

A look of relief came over Alexis' face. "Thanks, Nick."

Two mornings later we were airborne. Salomos was a competent pilot, and it appeared that the flight across the wild country of Rhodesia would be uneventful and pleasant. Salomos flew low so that we might spot occasional game animals and interesting topographical features of the bush.

The flight seemed to raise Salomos' spirits, and he seemed very much like his old self. But at mid-morning, just about halfway to Bulawayo, the serenity of the morning was transformed into a nightmare.

The small Mooney aircraft, a two-seater, began coughing. Salomos was not concerned at first, but then it became worse. He throttled the small engine, but that only made matters more difficult. We lost altitude and started into a wide, banking spin.

Salomos swore in Greek, then his face went pale. He studied the panel and glanced over at me. "The fuel gauge reads *full*," he shouted over the sputtering engine. "It has not moved from its original position this morning." He banged on the glass that covered the gauge, but nothing happened. The needle stayed fixed on the letter *F*.

"We're out of gas," I said incredulously. That was bad news in any airplane, particularly in a small one.

"Not quite, but we're running out fast," Salomos said, pulling the Mooney into a temporary, steep glide and fighting the controls. "This plane was sabotaged, Nick. The gauge was frozen in position, but the tanks were almost empty when we started out. It had to have been on purpose."

"Jesus," I muttered. "Will you be able to land it?"

"There is no airfield anywhere near here," he said, straining to keep the plane from going into

a tailspin. "But we will have to try a landing on the open veldt—if I can keep it in a glide pattern."

"Anything I can do?"

"Yes. Pray." Alexis glanced at me. "I am very sorry, Nick."

"Never mind that," I said. "Just get this thing down." I didn't even ask about chutes. There was no time. We were headed in a steep glide toward the grassy veldt.

The engine coughed and sputtered once more, then stalled for good as we saw the ground rush up at us. I figured it was over. There seemed to be no reasonable expectation of living through it.

Five hundred feet. We swooped downward like a bird with a broken wing. Three hundred. The acacia trees slid past underneath. One hundred. Salomos' face was rigid with tension, and his arms were corded with his efforts at the controls. Then there was a rushing of grass and thornbush at a dizzying speed, a wing being rent by the limb of a twisted tree, and the plane nosing up slightly at the last moment, sliding around sideways. The impact threw us against the front of the plane. There was a grinding and screeching of metal and a loud shattering of glass, and our bodies were punched around in the small cabin. Then came the final crashing stop, with my door flying open and my body flying head over heels through the grass to a crunching impact with the hard ground.

I remember nothing beyond that, except for

crawling painfully through the grass, instinctively dragging myself away from the plane, and then the explosion with the sound of flames crackling somewhere behind me.

TWO

I tried to push the memory of the crash out of my mind as I leaned heavily against the hard clay of the tall termite mound. But it was more difficult to eliminate the expression on the face of Alexis Salomos, the way it had looked in Salisbury, when I had said I would fly to Bulawayo with him.

There was still the insistent buzzing of flies beyond the glinting metallic hulk of the wrecked plane, but I tried not to listen. I focused again on the distant line of fever trees on the grassy horizon. Somewhere I had learned that fever trees sometimes announce the presence of water. But these trees were not in the direction that I had to walk to reach the village.

In a way I felt responsible for Salomos' tragic death. He had trusted me to help, and I had been incapable of doing so when he had needed me. He had expected counsel from me, and I had not foreseen the danger of the small plane. Also, I felt guilty because I had not totally believed his incredible story. However, his bloody corpse was blatant proof that at least part of his theory

had been valid. Someone had wanted him dead. Whether that person was someone living in the penthouse above the Apollo offices in Athens was still open to question.

I caught a movement in the corner of my eye and turned toward one of the chimney entrances of the termite mound. A small, bright green snake glided out of the opening a short distance from my left arm and seemed to stare at me. I jumped away. I didn't know that snakes took up residence in termite mounds. This one was a green mamba, one of the world's *three steps* snakes. If bitten, the victim would be able to put about three steps between himself and the reptile before its venom would kill him. The mamba, out of striking distance for the moment, slithered into an adjacent chimney.

I stumbled over to the wreckage as my pulse subsided. I looked around for a moment and found a sharp sliver of metal about a foot long on the ground. One end of it was very sharp. Ripping off a piece of wooden molding, partly charred, from a section of fuselage, I broke it into two pieces of equal length and splinted the wide end of the shard, tying the sticks on with my handkerchief to make a handle for my makeshift knife. I stuck the crude weapon into my belt and, without looking back at the wreck, started off toward the trees.

It was difficult just to walk in the bush country. The tall grass and the thornbushes pulled at my clothing and raked my flesh, grabbing at me and holding me back. A hornbill shrieked at me

from a nearby acacia. I found myself calculating the odds against survival. There are a hundred ways to die out there, and none of them are pleasant. In that grass, a man can walk right into a lion before he sees it. But it is the small creatures that generally cause the most trouble: snakes no bigger around than a man's finger and scorpions and ticks that burrow deep under the skin. If you find and drink the water, you may be plagued with liver flukes and other parasites that eat at a man from inside. And if you avoid these, you may still be attacked by the mosquitoes that carry yellow fever and malaria.

When I finally arrived at the trees, I found only the remains of a waterhole. The place had dried up. There was thick, black mud at the center and the hoofprints of many animals at the perimeter of the area.

I leaned against the green trunk of the nearest tree and rested in the shade. I had wasted my time and energy in coming here. The direction to the nearest village, the one that Salomos had mentioned in the plane, was at ninety degrees to the course that had brought me to this place. The walk in the boiling sun had weakened me even more. My mouth was like tanned leather. I remembered the thermos with its cold water that Salomos had brought aboard the plane. I had seen its crushed cylinder in the wreckage; its contents had boiled away in the fire. I tried not to think of the tropical sun overhead, or of the thirst in my throat, and began walking.

It must have been a couple of hours later

when I came to the realization that I could go no farther without rest. My legs were trembling with weakness, and I was drawing air into my lungs in long rasping breaths. I saw the dead stump of a tree, part of it in the sparse shadow of an adjacent thornbush, just a few yards ahead. I slumped heavily to the ground and propped myself against the stump. Just the act of sitting down, the relief from the physical exertion of walking, was satisfying.

My eyelids closed, and I ignored the aching in my body. I tried to forget the small muscles twitching in my thighs and the insect bites on my face and arms. I needed rest and I was going to get it. To hell with anything else.

A sound came from the bush.

My eyelids fluttered open. Had I been mistaken? I peered into the tall grass, but I saw nothing. It must have been my imagination. I closed my eyes again, but the sound was repeated.

This time my eyes opened more quickly. There was no doubt of it; it had been the sound of a human voice. I strained my ears and heard a twig break.

"It *was* something!" I muttered.

Then the sound became more constant and more distinct. Two men were talking in what appeared to be some bush dialect that I had never heard.

"Hello!" I yelled with the last of my strength.
"Over here!"

In another moment I saw their heads moving

toward me above the grass. Black heads and khaki shirts. As they saw me, their voices increased in volume, and one of them pointed.

I relaxed a little. I had been closer to civilization than I had thought. There must be a village somewhere nearby, or at least a road. The men were emerging from the grass and staring at me. They were tall, slim, and grim-faced.

"Hello," I said. "Do you have water?"

The men looked at each other, then back at me. They came and stood over me. I didn't try to get up. "Water," I said.

They were both dressed very shabbily in western clothes and wore makeshift sandals. The taller of the two pointed at my feet, and in a moment he was bending down and untying my shoe. Before I could ask what he was doing, he had taken it off and was holding it up to his companion. The one holding my shoe up for inspection had a large, wide scar that ran diagonally across his face. The other wore a small mirror in the stretched lobe of his right ear. Both carried *pangas*, machete-type knives, in their belts.

The tall one spoke to the other, and I realized he was speaking Swahili. "*Mzuri sana*," he said, grinning, referring to my shoes. He continued in Swahili. "This is my lucky day."

"Listen to me," I began weakly.

They ignored me. The tall man bent and untied my other shoe. I tried to pull my foot back, but he gave me a vicious look and yanked the second shoe from it. He kicked off his own

shabby sandals and jammed my shoes onto his feet, not bothering to tie the laces. "*Sawasawa!*" he said to his companion, ignoring me completely now.

I realized, quite abruptly, that these men were not going to be my saviors. And it occurred to me that I just might be worse off than before their arrival, if I was counting on survival.

"The shoes fit well." It was the tall one.

The other one was not enjoying the situation. "How is it that you assume the shoes are yours? Did we not come on him together?"

"It was I who saw him first," the tall one said. "You may have his trousers. If he has a pouch we will share its contents."

"It is not right that you take the shoes for yourself," the mirror-decorated one muttered.

The tall man turned to me. "Remove your pants," he commanded, still in Swahili. His eyes were yellow with red streaks shot through them and there were delicately etched scars on each cheek that were not noticeable at first because of the large scar.

My hand rested on the handle of my makeshift knife, hiding it from their view. It seemed that I would have to use it. The one with the stretched earlobe was taking the *panga* from his belt. There was little doubt of their intentions. They could not rob a white man of everything he had and then let him live.

"All right, I'll take my pants off," I said. I had regained some strength, but I did not want to

show it. "But I must get to my feet." I extended my left hand to the tall one.

He looked contemptuously at it for a moment and then grabbed at my forearm roughly and jerked me to my feet. At the instant I came off the ground, I pulled my metal-shard knife from my waist and shoved it hard into the African's mid-section.

His eyes saucered in surprise as the razor-sharp metal slid through flesh and muscle. His right hand went automatically to the handle of his *panga*, but that was his last voluntary act. He grunted out an ugly noise and slid to the dust at my feet.

Mirror-ear stared wide-eyed at his fallen companion for a brief moment. Then he made a wild sound in his throat and swung the *panga* that he had just drawn.

I ducked backwards. The big blade sizzled past my face cutting the air audibly and just missing my head and shoulder. If I hadn't moved, it would have decapitated me. When I had avoided the *panga*, however, I had fallen to the ground. The African now moved over me and swung the knife again, and the glistening, curved blade whistled through the air toward my neck. I rolled quickly to my right, and the blade thudded the hard clay. While my attacker recovered his balance, I turned and kicked out savagely at his leg. I heard bone snap somewhere. He fell to the ground near me with a loud cry.

If I had been my usual self, that would have been the end of him. But I was slow to follow up the advantages that I had created. As I got to my knees, the African was already standing and a look of desperation came over his face. He swung at me again, and this time the arc was wide. The blade slit the sleeve of my shirt as it sliced downward. I jabbed out toward him with my shard and made a shallow laceration on his chest. He gave another grunt and swung the *panga* at my head as I fell back against the stump. The force of the swing caused Mirror-ear to lose his balance and fall across my right arm. I grabbed the back of his ragged collar with my left hand, pulled his head back, and drew the metal shard across his throat.

Blood spattered onto my face and chest as the African gasped loudly and reached convulsively for his severed throat. He fell face down onto the stump, still clutching at his throat, and then he rolled off onto the hard ground, motionless.

Breathing hard, I slumped back on one elbow. I was angry to have wasted important energy needed for survival on this fight, but I was grateful that I was still alive. When I had made a mental note of the dangers of the bush back at the wreck, I had forgotten one: man. Man, it seemed, was always at the top of the list. If you ignored that one factor, you might be dead before the bush could kill you.

At least I had one fact to go on in this situation. These men had come from a westerly direction, rather than the southwesterly one which I

had taken. It just might be that they had come through a village or had left a road back there somewhere. The same could be said of the direction in which they were headed. I rose weakly and chose the westerly direction.

The hot African sun was slanting down in the sky when I gave out again. I collapsed in the tall grass, wondering whether there was still any real chance of making it. I needed water badly. There was no longer any feeling in my tongue and mouth. I lay there and watched a scorpion crawl slowly past me in the grass. I didn't know whether I could move if it attacked, but it did not seem to take notice of me. In a moment it was moving away. I grimaced and envied it, for it had no problem of survival, at least not at the moment. It seemed a bit ironic that its species had been crawling around on the planet's surface for over four hundred million years, long predating the dinosaurs, and that it would probably be on earth well after man was gone. It didn't seem fair somehow, but then I was prejudiced.

As I lay there, another sound assailed my ears. It was a distant humming, not unlike that of the flies earlier. But this sound quickly grew in volume and became recognizable as that of a car engine.

I propped myself up and cocked my head to hear. Yes, it was a vehicle of some kind. I rose unsteadily and headed toward the sound. I could see nothing but the grass and occasional trees.

But the noise was getting closer with every second.

"Hey!" I yelled out over the grass. "Hey, over here!"

I stumbled and fell. Getting groggily to my feet once more, I staggered forward again. In a moment, I saw it—a Land Rover, dusty and scratched up, bumping along a secondary road that was nothing more than a track through the grass. The Rover, an open vehicle, was occupied by two men who had not seen me, for it approached the nearest point to me on the road and continued on.

"Hey!" I yelled.

I stumbled awkwardly through the grass and finally made it to the road. I yelled again when I got there. I started drunkenly after the vehicle, but fell on my face.

I lay there swearing aloud and feeling desperation rise in my chest. That car might be my last chance for survival.

Then I heard the Rover slow and brake to a stop. I tried to get up to see what had happened, but my strength was gone. I heard the engine idling a moment, then the Rover was in first gear again, swinging back around on the road and heading toward me. They had either heard me or seen me after all.

In just seconds the car stopped near me, the engine was cut, and I heard two men speaking in British accents.

"Good Lord, it's a European."

"What's he doing out here in the bush on foot?"

"Maybe we ought to ask him."

Soon there was cool water running into my mouth, spilling onto my dirty shirt front, and I could feel my tongue again.

"Good God, man, what happened?"

I focused on the two beefy faces leaning over me. They were middle-aged, white Rhodesians, probably gentlemen farmers out for a day in the bush.

"A plane crash," I answered. "I walked away from it."

As they hoisted me into the Rover, I knew I had made it. But I could not forget the body of Alexis Salomos being devoured by hyenas out there because of somebody in Athens. I hoped that David Hawk would let me dig into what was happening in the Apollo Building to find out whether Adrian Stavros was really in Brazil as everybody thought. Because if any of Alexis Salomos' theory were true, there was trouble ahead of a kind that AXE had not seen in a good, long time.

THREE

"You don't look too good, Nick."

David Hawk, director of America's super-secret AXE agency, was holding a stubby cigar between the fingers of his right hand and leaning forward on his wide mahogany desk. We were sitting in his office at AXE headquarters which was cleverly hidden in the rented space of the Amalgamated Press & Wire Services on DuPont Circle in Washington.

I regarded him with a wry grin. "They wanted me to stay a while longer in that Salisbury hospital. But you know how quickly I get bored. If I'm pale, it's because I need the sun and a good sirloin steak. What do you think of Salomos' story?"

Hawk puffed on the cigar and blew a smoke ring toward me. He looked small and thin sitting behind the big desk, with his rumpled, gray hair and his Connecticut farmer's face. But I knew that the frail look was deceiving. He was a dynamo.

"It frightens me a little," he said. "It also frightens me that you damn near got yourself

killed between assignments. I never saw a man who found trouble so easily."

I shrugged my shoulders. "Salomos was a friend. Of mine and of AXE. He went out of his way to help us find Borisov that time, remember?"

"Yes, I remember," Hawk said soberly. "Well, your Rhodesian escapade is over, so we'll drop it. As for the possibility that Adrian Stavros might be planning a *coup* against the Greek government, I wouldn't put it past him."

"Does he still own the plantation in Brazil?"

"According to our sources, that's still his headquarters. We don't have a recent report." Hawk leaned back in his big leather chair. "If that was really Stavros that your friend saw coming from the Minourkos penthouse, we're definitely confronted with an interesting situation. Dreams of running a whole country fit in very nicely with what we've learned about him."

Hawk studied his bony knuckles. "Adrian Stavros was always a neurotic personality, perhaps psychopathic. Besides running a successful smuggling ring in Brazil that the government there has been unable to break, he has also made a business of political assassination, the most recent believed to be the killing of the Israeli official Moshe Ben Canaan."

"Then I take it AXE is interested in Alexis Salomos' story," I said.

"I'm afraid we have to be. And I suppose that because you considered Salomos a friend, you'd like to have the assignment."

"Yes sir, I would."

Hawk stubbed out the cigar in a nearby ashtray. "My first impulse is to say no and give the case to another man. You know how I try to avoid an agent's personal involvement in an assignment."

"It's important to me that Alexis' killer doesn't go free," I said quietly.

"All right. You can handle this one. But be especially careful, Nick. The way to start on this, I think, is to go to Rio and talk to the CIA man there. Find out if Stavros is outside the country and where he's been spending his time. Then if your leads take you to Athens, go there. Just keep me informed."

"Don't I always?" I grinned.

"Well, you sometimes tend to forget that there are people back here at their dull desk jobs whose responsibility it is to run the show." His voice had taken on that truculent tone that it sometimes did when he spoke of protocol and chain of command. "If you need help at any point along the way, ask for it. That's what we're here for."

"Of course."

He opened a desk drawer and pulled out an envelope. His eyes avoided mine. "Anticipating your request and my eventual concession to you, I had the foresight, if not the wisdom, to purchase your ticket."

I smiled. "Thanks." I reached across the desk and took the envelope.

"You'd better wait to see how this all comes out before you decide whether I've done you any favors," Hawk replied.

The next evening I boarded the Pan Am flight to Rio de Janeiro. I had rested all day and was feeling pretty much my old self again. The flight was uneventful, but I kept thinking of that other one in the small Mooney aircraft when Salomos showed me the veldt, of the trouble and the crash landing, and of the way Salomos' corpse had looked in the hot sun.

I arrived in Rio the next morning and checked into the Floriano Hotel near the Copacabana Palace. It was just a block from the beach, and it had the flavor of colonial Brazil. The room had a ceiling fan and louvered doors, and the narrow balcony gave a small view of the sea.

It was hot in Rio. All the Brazilians who could get there were at the beach, and most of them must have been at the Copacabana area near the hotel. Anticipating the heat, I had brought a tropical worsted suit along. I showered at noon, donned the lightweight suit over Wilhelmina, my Luger, and Hugo, the sheathed stiletto, on my right arm, and went for lunch at one of my favorite small restaurants, the Chale at Rua da Matriz 54. This restaurant had been a colonial home and was still furnished with valuable antiques and paintings. Negro servants waited tables and tended bar. I ordered a *churrasco mixto*, which consisted of chunks of beef and pork in vegetables, and passed up the usual *chopp*, an excellent local draft beer, for their very fine Grande Uniao Cabernet wine. But I had just started the meal when I saw the girl walk in and seat herself at a nearby table.

She was tall and svelte, and her mane of flam-

ing red hair made her milky white skin appear even paler. Her dazzling green mini-dress made a striking contrast with her hair and revealed a good portion of long, perfect thighs, and above the waist, a breathtaking cleavage. She wore green shoes that matched the dress and green bracelets on her left arm.

The red hair confused me for a moment, but then I realized that when I had last seen her, the hair had been short and brunette. That had been in Israel over a year ago. The girl's name was Erika Nystrom. She was a member of Israel's Shin Bet intelligence network. Her code name had been Flame when she and I had worked together to foil a Russian plot against the Israeli government, but that name was changed with each assignment.

I rose and went to her table. When she raised her long lashes to meet my eyes, a smile swept across her face. "Oh!" she exclaimed. "It's you. What a pleasant surprise." She spoke English with almost no trace of an accent.

Erika's parents had been Scandinavian Jews. Her family had lived first in Oslo and then in Copenhagen before they had emigrated to Israel when she was only eight years old.

"I was about to say the same thing," I said. Erika and I had spent an intimate evening in Tel Aviv while waiting for a courier to show up; it was an evening we had both enjoyed very much. Her eyes told me now that she remembered it with fondness. "Will you join me at my table?"

"Well, someone is joining me later, Nick. Would you mind?"

"Not as much as not talking to you," I said.

She joined me at my table and ordered a light lunch for herself and the third person, who she explained, was a fellow agent. "You look very well, Nick."

"You should have seen me a week ago," I said. "I like the red hair, Erika."

She dazzled me with a smile. A long, aquiline nose set off a wide, sensuous mouth. Her eyes were a dark green, and the dress made them sparkle. "Thanks," she said. "It's mine, except for the color. It was short when we—worked together in Israel."

"I remember," I said. "Are you here on business?"

"Yes," she answered. "You?"

"Yes," I grinned. "It's always business, isn't it?"

"Almost always."

I recalled reading in the newspapers recently that Israel was outraged by the assassination of Moshe Ben Canaan and that their president had vowed to get to the bottom of it. It was this assassination in which American intelligence believed Adrian Stavros to be involved. I couldn't help wondering if Erika was in Rio to either abduct Adrian Stavros to Israel, which was the Israeli's style, or to kill him.

"Are you going to be in Rio long enough for us to have a drink and a talk together?" I asked.

"Possibly," she said. The cleavage was pushed

together by her arms as she rested them on the table, and my blood pressure rose ten points. Her green eyes looked into mine and told me that she knew I was not talking about wine and conversation.

I picked up my glass. She had ordered and had been served the same Grande Uniao Cabernet. "To that possibility," I toasted.

She picked up her own glass and clinked it against mine. "To that possibility."

We had just finished the toast when the young man arrived. I didn't even see him until he was standing beside us. He was a blocky, muscular fellow with very short, blond hair and a hard, square face. Part of his left ear was missing, but that defect didn't harm his masculine good looks. He wore a beige summer-weight suit that didn't completely conceal the bulge under his left arm.

"I did not see you at first, Erika," he said rather stiffly, eyeing me. "I did not expect you to be with someone."

The words were intended as a mild reproach. They had been spoken with a marked accent. I recalled a photo of this man in AXE's Israeli intelligence file. He was Zachariah Ghareb, an executioner of Shin Bet. My theory about his and Erika's presence in Rio seemed strengthened.

"This is an old friend, Zach," Erika said. "He worked with me in Israel."

Ghareb seated himself at the third place setting. "I know," he said. "Carter, I believe."

"That's right."

"Your reputation precedes you."

His manner was brittle, almost hostile. I sensed his jealousy about my knowing Erika. Before I could answer him, he turned to her. "Did you order the vichyssoise as I suggested?"

"Yes, Zach," Erika said, a little embarrassed by his lack of friendliness. "It will be here shortly."

"The vichyssoise is the only thing worth eating at this restaurant," Zach complained a bit too loudly.

"I'm sorry you've had bad luck," I replied smoothly. "I find most of the dishes here well prepared. Perhaps they've changed chefs since your last visit."

Zach turned and gave me a taut smile. "Perhaps."

I decided that the conversation was going to be something less than pleasant from this point on. I was finished with my meal, so I called the waiter to bring my check. I offered to pay for the whole party, but Zach quickly declined.

"Where are you staying?" I asked Erika.

"At the Corumba on the Avenida Rio Branco," she said.

Zach stared at her.

"Under what name?"

She hesitated. "Vargas."

"May I call you there?"

"You will have little time for socializing," Zach said quickly to her.

She ignored him and gave me a nice smile.

"Yes, you may call me. I hope we can get together again, Nick."

I rose. "The feeling is mutual." I touched my hand to hers and our eyes locked together for a brief moment. I knew Zach was jealous, and since I didn't like him, I was playing it up for his benefit. He sat there glaring at me. "You'll hear from me."

"Good," Erika said.

I turned from them and left the restaurant. I could almost feel the heat from Zach's hostility on my back as I walked out.

That afternoon I took the cable car up to spectacular Corcovado Mountain, which was crested with the enormous statue of Christ the Redeemer. When I got there, I went to the observation parapet, stood in a designated spot, and waited. In about fifteen minutes, a man joined me at the railing. He was about my height, but slimmer. Although he was not yet in middle age, his long face was deeply lined. He was Carl Thompson, and he worked for the CIA.

"Fine view, isn't it?" he said by way of introduction, waving a hand toward the city below which glistened white in the sun and was flanked by green hills and cobalt sea.

"Breathtaking," I said. "How's it going, Thompson?"

"About the same," he said. "It's been fairly quiet down here since the last change of administration at Brasilia. How's everything at AXE these days? For a while there you guys

were shooting up more ammunition than the army in Asia."

I grinned. "Sometimes it does seem that way. I've kept busy, as I'm sure you have."

"And now they've put you onto Adrian Stavros."

"That's right." I watched a cruise ship, plying the blue water with its sleek bow, move slowly into the harbor. It looked like a toy boat down there. "When is the last time you saw him?"

He thought a moment. "We have the plantation under surveillance on a spot basis. He was seen leaving the place five or six weeks ago. We think he got on a plane going to Madrid."

"That flight could have continued to Athens."

"It probably did. Has he been seen there?"

"We think so. What goes on at the plantation?"

"The plantation is his real headquarters. He has the Apex Imports outfit here in Rio, and we think the smuggling is conducted through that company. But he doesn't visit its offices very much, even though his name is openly associated with it. The president of the company makes regular trips to Paracatu."

"And that's where the plantation is located?"

Thompson nodded. "It's near the village, out in the middle of nowhere. It's guarded by Stavros' own small army of ex-cons, political fanatics, and ex-Nazis. There's just a skeleton force there now, though."

"You haven't noticed anything unusual out there, anything out of the ordinary?" I asked.

"Well, if you mean a build-up of people or arms, the answer is no. But there has been a visitor whom none of us had seen before. We've had almost constant surveillance since his appearance with Stavros ninety days ago, and nobody has seen him leave the place. That in itself isn't particularly unusual, except that one of my two men insists that the new fellow, a middle-aged man, is a prisoner there. He's been hustled from one building to another by an armed guard."

"What did this man look like?"

Thompson shrugged. "We have a photo of him, but it's from a distance. He's about fifty, I'd say, with short, dark hair that has become a little gray at the temples. He's a stocky man who always seems to wear silk shirts."

It sounded as if the man might be Minourkos, the Greek shipping magnate whose political pronouncements had recently shaken up Athens and at whose penthouse Adrian Stavros had been seen.

"Can I have a copy of the photograph?"

"That can be arranged," Thompson said. "Look, Carter, in the last week or so we've had to temporarily reduce our surveillance of the plantation to spot-checks again, and I may have to pull our people out of there completely in the next couple of days because there is another problem that has developed for us. Do you want

me to get permission to put a man back on it with you?"

"No," I said. "Hawk has promised me help if I need it. When can I have the photograph?"

"How about tonight?"

"Fine."

"There's a drop site we use that's a bit different," Thompson said. "It's a city bus. You will get on at your hotel. My man will already have been on and off. You will go to the rear where nobody sits and take the last seat on your right. The photograph will be taped underneath that seat. The bus will be marked *Estrada de Ferro* and will take you downtown if you want to go that far."

"When does the bus go past the hotel?"

"At seven-fifteen. The bus will be marked number eleven."

"Okay," I said. "And thanks."

"Any time," Thompson said. A moment later he was gone.

In the late afternoon I made a brief visit to the offices of the Apex Import Company. It was located in one of the old renovated government buildings that had been left empty when the capital moved to Brasilia. The offices were three flights up, and the elevator wasn't working.

I entered a rather small reception office upstairs. There was perspiration on my brow from the climb, for the air-conditioning in the building seemed not to work much better than the elevator and it was a muggy day in Rio. A

dark-haired girl sat at a metal desk and looked up at me suspiciously when I entered.

"May I help you?" she asked in Portuguese.

I responded in English. "I would like to see Mr. Stavros."

Her dark eyes narrowed even more. When she spoke again, it was in broken English. "I believe you come to wrong place, senhor."

"Oh?" I said. "But Mr. Stavros told me himself that I might contact him through the Apex Imports Company."

"Senhor, Mr. Stavros does not have an office—"

The door to a private office opened and a husky, dark-haired man appeared. "Is there some difficulty?" he demanded. His tone was not what could be called friendly.

"I was just looking for Mr. Stavros," I said.

"For what purpose?"

I ignored the rudeness. "Mr. Stavros advised me that I might purchase Japanese cameras in wholesale lots from him if I contacted him here." I acted perplexed. "Am I in the wrong office?"

"Mr. Stavros is the chairman of the board," the dark man said, "but he has no office here, and he does not do business for the company. I am its president; you may deal with me."

"This is Senhor Carlos Ubeda," the girl interposed, a bit haughtily.

"I'm glad to meet you, sir" I said, extending my hand. He took it stiffly. "My name is Johnson. I met Mr. Stavros quite casually in the Chale Restaurant several weeks ago. He said he would

return from a trip to Europe about this time and that I might contact him here."

"He is still in Athens," the girl said.

Ubeda gave her a blistering look. "As I said, Mr. Stavros cannot be reached here. But I will be happy to forward your order."

"I see. Well, I did want to deal with him personally. Can you tell me when he might return from Athens?"

A muscle twitched in Ubeda's face near his mouth. "He is not expected back from Europe for several weeks, Mr. Johnson. If you want to do business, you will have to deal with me."

I smiled. "I'll give you a call, Mr. Ubeda. Thanks for your time."

I left them staring after me. Once again out on the street, I hailed a taxi and returned to my hotel. The girl's slip had given me the confirmation I had wanted. Adrian Stavros was indeed in Athens as Salomos had told me. And if that photograph turned out to be a picture of Nikkor Minourkos, things were getting interesting.

I showered and rested for a short time, then boarded bus number eleven according to Thompson's instructions. As he had predicted, the photograph was taped to the seat in a small, brown envelope. I recovered it and went to a little cafe downtown and ordered a good Portuguese wine. Only then did I take the photograph from the envelope and study it.

As Thompson had said, the picture was not a good one, even though a telephoto lens had undoubtedly been used. It was a shot of three men,

having just emerged from a rambling ranch house, walking toward the camera. The man in the middle was the one Thompson had described to me, and despite the small size of the face that I had to identify, there was little doubt in my mind, as I compared it to the face that I had been shown in AXE photographs, that this man was in fact Nikkor Minourkos. I had never seen the other men before.

Minourkos was walking sullenly between the other two figures. None of them were talking, but the man on Minourkos' left, a tall, Teutonic-like fellow, was looking toward Minourkos as if he had just spoken to him and expected an answer. Minourkos' face was somber and grave.

I slipped the photograph back into the envelope and stuck it into a pocket. If the CIA agent's observation had been correct, my friend Salomos' theory was indeed proven. Somehow Stavros had taken over the Minourkos operation in Athens and was plotting a *coup* in Minourkos' name.

After a light meal at the café, I called Erika Nystrom's room at the Corumba Hotel. Her voice was friendly and warm. She said she would have the rest of the evening to herself, alone, and that she would be delighted to have me visit her. She and Zach had had a small argument, and he had gone off to a nightclub in a huff.

Making a date for nine, I returned to my hotel and placed a call to Hawk. He answered in a tired voice and activated the scrambler at his

end of the line so that we could talk without putting everything in code.

"What an unseemly hour, Nick," he said a bit testily. "It seems to be the only time I ever hear from you."

I grinned. I could visualize him sitting at the special phone in his super-secret apartment, his gray hair ruffled, with perhaps a silk smoking jacket on his stringy frame and the inevitable cigar clamped between his teeth.

"At least I'm not in some girl's bedroom," I said with questionable honesty.

"Hmmp! The evening's not over yet, is it? Don't con me, my boy. I've been through all that myself."

Sometimes I felt as if Hawk had psychic powers that laid my innermost thoughts bare to his analytical mind.

"No, sir," I admitted. "The evening isn't over. But I've made good use of the first part of it. I think Minourkos is a prisoner at Stavros' plantation near Paracatu. Also, I've learned that Stavros is in Athens."

"Well," Hawk said pensively, "that's interesting."

"That fits into Salomos' theory."

"So you're going to Paracatu?" Hawk asked.

"That's right. Maybe I can get to the bottom of this. Thompson of CIA says the plantation is lightly guarded at the moment. But there is a complication."

"Yes?"

"An old friend is here in Rio. The young lady

I worked with in Israel on the Promised Land Operation."

"Oh, yes. Nystrom. Why is it that good looking women seem to follow you around the world?"

I chuckled. "Mustn't be envious, sir. As you pointed out, you had your days, too—and nights."

A sigh issued from the other end. "Get on with it, Nick."

"Well, sir, it occurs to me that Miss Nystrom just may be here in Brazil for the same reason I am. Or, rather, after the same man. We do suspect Stavros in the Ben Canaan assassination, don't we?"

A small silence. "Yes, we do. And you've made a good guess, I'd say."

"She has an executioner with her," I added. "I think they're gunning for Stavros. They may not know he's in Athens at the moment. But I don't want all of us to show up at the plantation at the same time and end up shooting at each other by mistake or otherwise fouling up the works. My idea is for you to verify Nystrom's mission with Israeli intelligence. You're an old friend of her boss, Giroux, and I think he'll level with you under the circumstances."

Hawk grunted assent. "You're right."

"If that's the case, I think we should all be frank, and sit down to see whether we can help each other. Or at least keep out of each other's way."

The silence was longer this time. "Okay, my boy. I'll call Giroux and get in touch with you."

"Thanks," I said. "I won't move until I hear from you."

I didn't have to wait long. An hour later, just before I left for Erika's hotel, I got the call from Hawk. He must have gotten Giroux out of bed before dawn in Jerusalem. Giroux's answer was affirmative, and I was instructed to discuss the Stavros matter openly with Nystrom who was in charge of the assignment, even though she had Zach Ghareb with her. I was given a code word that would prove that Giroux had ordered her to discuss her work with me.

I arrived at Erika's room a few minutes after nine. She met me at the door in a brief lounging robe that showed much of her thighs. She was wearing a sultry perfume and a wide, sensuous smile.

"I thought you'd never get here," she said as she closed the door behind me and locked it.

I moved into the room and looked it over. It was larger than mine, and I found myself wondering whether Zach shared it with her.

"Would you like a brandy? I have an unopened bottle, and it's the best you can buy in Rio."

"That sounds good," I said.

She poured two drinks into balloon glasses. As I took my glass, I let my eyes caress her lovely face. "You were always a girl to demand the best."

"And I generally get it," she said. "Do you?"

"I had you in Tel Aviv," I said quietly and with a smile.

The long lashes fluttered as her eyes avoided mine for a moment. When she looked back up she was smiling. I reached out and touched the softness of her cheek. She took a sip of the brandy. I put my arm around her slim waist and drew her to me. She smelled sweet and felt soft.

"Remember that night, Nick?" she breathed into my ear. "Do you really remember it as I do?"

"I remember."

"It was very good, wasn't it?"

"Very."

We set our glasses down on a nearby table. I pulled her close to me and touched her lips with mine. Her tongue snaked inside my mouth.

"God, Nick," she mumbled.

I was moving my hands over her backside, feeling the curves that swept down to her thighs. Her hips had begun to undulate slowly under my touch.

She pushed me gently from her and snapped the light off. Then she began to undress slowly and gracefully. Under the robe she wore only small bikini panties. Her breasts thrust eagerly toward me as she took the robe from her shoulders. Her bosom was full and ripe and milky white. In another moment the small piece of underclothing was slipped down over her hips and thighs, falling to the floor in a wispy heap.

Erika stared openly at me, letting her eyes travel over my naked body in the dimness of the room.

"Beautiful," she purred. "So much hard muscle."

I drew her to me, feeling her nakedness against mine. She ran a hand over my chest and shoulders working her way down on my body. She stroked me, caressed me, made love to me with her hands as my fingers explored her. Her thighs parted at my touch, and she moaned.

There was a soft, thick carpet beneath us. Erika slipped to her knees on it, letting her hands slide along my body as she went down. She knew all the ways to arouse a man and she had no hesitancy about using them. In a moment I slid down beside her and pushed her roughly on her back on the thick shag of the carpet. I knelt over her, moving my hands over her breasts. She gasped. The long thighs hugged my sides. I moved a hand along one silky inner thigh.

"Oh, yes," she purred. Her mouth was partly open, the lovely, green eyes heavily lidded.

As I entered her, the full mouth went wide for a moment and a small shudder passed through her body. Then she began to move with me, her fingers gripping my shoulders, her thighs locked around my waist. I don't know how long we stayed locked together before it was over for both of us.

Afterward I lay with her for a long time, not wanting to move. A warm relaxation gradually seeped into the outermost fibers of my flesh and the innermost depths of my soul.

Later we dressed and sat on a small sofa together and finished our brandy. Erika had combed out her long red hair and she looked just as fresh as when I had walked into the room.

"I'm glad Zach didn't come pounding on the door," she remarked.

"He seems very jealous, Erika. Have you been intimate?"

She looked at me. "Once. His idea, not mine. And he was very inept. I told him there would never be anything physical between us again. He's bitter about it. I didn't want him on this case, but I was overruled. He's very good with a gun."

"He will have to be on this assignment, won't he?"

She regarded me thoughtfully. "Yes."

"Erika, I guessed why you are in Brazil. It seems we are after the same man. I had my supervisor communicate with yours and he confirmed what I thought. We're to discuss our separate assignments and cooperate with each other if it seems feasible."

The green eyes narrowed a little. "Giroux has not been in touch with Zach and me."

"You'll receive a cable in the next few hours. In the meantime, I've been given a code word that is supposed to allow you to take me into your confidence. The word is *Goliath*."

She stared in surprise. "That is the right word!"

"Giroux sent it."

She poured herself another brandy. "All right,

Nick. But I'll wait for the cable to tell me just how free I'm supposed to be with you." She smiled and kissed my cheek.

I had to expect her to be cautious. She was a good agent. "That's fine. I'll just tell you some of my ideas. You don't have to talk at all."

"That's fair."

"We're both looking for Adrian Stavros, but for different reasons." Her face was expressionless. She wasn't giving away a thing. "You want him for the assassination of Ben Canaan. What we want him for is not yet quite clear to us, but it may involve Greek politics and the abduction of Nikkor Minourkos."

"The Greek shipping magnate?"

"That's right. He may be at Paracatu, being held against his will. Stavros is in Athens, so you'll either have to await his return or go to Europe after him. But I think the way to him is through whatever we can learn at Paracatu. I have to talk with Minourkos.

"If you're interested, I'll take you two to Paracatu with me. It might raise the odds of getting into the place. Talk it over with Zach and let me know tomorrow after you've received your cable."

"If we were indeed after Stavros," Erika said, "wouldn't it be better for us to go directly to Athens?"

"Stavros is believed to be making his temporary headquarters there in Minourkos' penthouse, which is a veritable fortress. You can't just storm the place, you and Zach. And getting past his bodyguards on the rare occasions

he leaves the place might be just as difficult. But Minourkos can tell us how to get to Stavros."

She was suddenly quiet as she considered my suggestion. When she looked up at me, there was a slight smile on the full lips. "I'll be in touch with you tomorrow morning, Nick darling."

I leaned over and touched her lips with mine. "You do that." I rose, reached for my weapons, and strapped them on. Then I put my jacket on over them. "And keep Zach on a short chain, will you?"

She liked that. She was still laughing when I left the room.

FOUR

My mind was on Adrian Stavros as I left Erika's hotel. It was late evening by now, and there were no taxis in sight. I walked cautiously along the Avenida Rio Branco. Getting into the headquarters of Stavros at Paracatu, even with its reduced force of guards, might prove quite a challenge. Stavros' little group had a bad reputation. He had collected the dregs of society around him at Paracatu. These were essentially like himself, but without his leadership abilities. Thinking back on it, I decided that Adolf Hitler must have started out in much the same way. There must have been few people in the Germany of the 1930s who took the ex-corporal seriously. This example was a lesson to be learned, but the world never seemed to learn it.

I walked several blocks without seeing any sign of a cab. I was getting into an area of store fronts and businesses of the street. When I turned into a side street to start off toward my hotel, having given up on transportation for the moment, I had a surprise in store for me. At the third shop front, a dark figure stepped out of the

shadows and swung a fist at me. There was a knife in the fist.

I had gotten almost past the entrance when the attack came. If he had waited another second, I would not have seen him at all, the attack would have been successful, and the knife would have sunk into my back. But in his anxiety to get the job done, he moved just a bit too fast, and I caught the movement in my peripheral vision.

As the knife came at my back, I twisted sharply and threw my left arm out to block the thrust. I succeeded, but the blade cut through the cloth of my jacket and shirt and slashed my forearm in a shallow gash. I let the weight of the man carry him to me. Then I turned with him in my grasp and slammed him up against the building beside us.

For a moment I thought it was Zach, his jealousy having gotten the better of him, for the man was stocky and strong. But when I got a better look, I saw that he was bigger than Zach and that he had dark hair. He looked Brazilian, and he was a real thug.

I reached for Wilhelmina with my free hand, but my assailant was not about to let me gain that advantage. He slashed out wildly again with the knife, this time aiming at my face. I ducked aside and partially deflected the blade, but it nicked my ear. He raised the weapon a third time and threw his weight against me.

His momentum was too much. He knocked me down and we hit the pavement together. I

punched at his jaw with a short right, but he didn't even seem to notice. We rolled over once while I tried to keep the jabbing knife from my body. I wanted Hugo, my stiletto, but I could not free my hand and arm even for a moment to allow the knife to slip into my palm.

For a brief moment the big man was on top of me. He swore in Portuguese and stabbed down viciously at my chest. The knife wasn't a long one, the blade being quite wide, but the edge was honed to razor sharpness. It glowed dully in the night as I grabbed his knife arm at the last moment before the blade reached my chest. Our arms trembled there for a moment while he struggled to sink the blade home. I got my right hand free and grabbed blindly for his face. I felt his eyes and dug my index and middle fingers into them. I raked the left eyeball with my middle finger and gouged into the right one with my index finger. The eyeball popped, and my finger came away wet.

"Ahhhh!" the assailant yelled, grabbing at his eyes with his free hand and forgetting the knife in the other. He yelled again and partially fell off me.

Hugo finally slipped into my right hand during this brief rest. I had just gotten a good grasp on it when the big man yelled insanely and raised the knife again to smash out blindly with it. I swung the stiletto in under his upraised arm, and the blade entered his side just below his ribcage and sank to the hilt.

Then I saw the assailant's remaining eye star-

ing out over my head into the blackness, and in that moment I distinctly saw the gray wetness on his right cheek under the destroyed eye. I pulled the stiletto from his side, and he fell heavily across me, his own knife clattering to the pavement.

I shoved the body off me and got to my feet. Looking about me quickly, I saw that no pedestrians were around to see what had occurred. I went through the man's pockets and found some identification in a billfold. One of the cards showed him to be an employee of the Apex Imports Company.

It appeared I had made more of an impression on the man named Ubeda than I had thought. Or maybe he had telephoned Stavros in Athens, and Stavros had denied ever hearing of me. Probably Ubeda had figured I was a cop of some kind who was nosing into the business of Apex Imports. Or a CIA man who was getting too curious. Whoever Ubeda thought I was, he obviously had had me tailed and knew where I was staying. It would be in my best interest to leave for Paracatu at the earliest opportunity.

I left the dead Brazilian and walked quickly back to my hotel. There was no further incident that night, and the morning came uneventfully.

Erika Nystrom, Zach, and I met at nine A.M. at a small café on the Avenida Presidenta Vargas with a view of the hills behind downtown Rio and the colorful *favela* hillside shacks above the city. Zach had guessed my intimacy with Erika and was unhappy about the prospect of

working with me for even a short period of time. He was even more hostile than he had been before. Erika had received the coded cablegram from Jerusalem that carried orders for her and Zach to cooperate with me in any way necessary for the success of our common goal, stopping Adrian Stavros.

"If you need information from Minourkos, *you* go to Paracatu," Zach said tightly to me, his blue eyes flashing anger. His coffee on the table before him was untouched. "Our mission is to find Stavros and eliminate him. We obviously will not find him at Paracatu."

His hard eyes bore into mine. I turned from him to Erika. She was obviously distressed with his behavior. "What do you say, Erika?" I asked.

"I've told Zach already. I think your approach is right not only for you, but for us as well."

"Your brain is clouded with sex!" Zach hissed at her. "This man is obviously your lover. Anything he says seems reasonable to you."

"Please, Zach!" Erika said harshly.

"Oh, Christ," I mumbled, shaking my head. "Look, I don't need any sophomoric love antics getting in the way. Maybe I was wrong about our being able to work together. I can get help from Hawk just by asking. Or maybe the CIA. But I'm not going to get mixed up with some trigger-happy gunman who can't keep his personal feelings under control."

Zach's face suddenly grew beet red, and he started out of his chair. "Listen, Carter—"

"Sit down!" Erika ordered in a quiet but authoritative tone.

Zach shot a hard look at her, then settled back into his seat. He grumbled something under his breath, but avoided my eyes.

"If there is another outburst like that, we're going to have to have a talk," Erika said. "Do you understand, Zach?"

He hesitated. When he spoke, he snapped the word out. "Yes."

"There is nothing between us, Zach. Are you listening to me?"

He flashed a hard look at her. "Sure."

"There is nothing between us and never will be. So whatever passes between Nick and me is irrelevant to you. If we are to work together you must understand that."

He seemed to have relaxed a little. He glanced at me and then at Erika. His fists clenched on the table. "If you say so."

"I do say so. Now, I'm going to Paracatu. If you think such a plan is ill-advised, I'll try to get you taken off this assignment."

He looked at her, and his face changed and softened. "You know I wouldn't let you go without me." His eyes met mine again. "You and Carter are running the show, it seems. If you go, I will go."

"And can we lay off the courting competition until this is over?" I asked.

"You heard her," Zach said sullenly. "There is no competition." He looked down at his coffee cup.

"I'm sorry, Zach," Erika said.

He hunched his shoulders. "When do we leave for Paracatu?"

I studied him for a moment. Maybe it would work out after all. "The sooner the better."

"I know where we can rent a car," Erika said. "We can take the Brasilia road which passes through the Tijuca forest most of the way."

"That's right," I said. "If we can get the car today, I suggest we leave this evening. It would be best to drive during the night through that hot, sticky jungle."

"That is fine with me," Zach said.

"Then it's settled," Erika added. "Zach, will you help me pick out a reliable automobile?"

He glanced at her. A small grin moved his face. "From what I read about Carter, he's the car expert. Why don't we all go?" He looked over at me inquiringly.

I held his gaze for a moment. Yes, he would work out. "I'll get us a cab," I said.

We were under way that evening. On my recommendation, Zach had picked out a black BMW 3.0 CS sedan for the trip. Its handling characteristics were tops, and it had a gearbox that was a pleasure to operate. Zach drove until almost midnight, and then I took over. The road was not what could be considered well-traveled, even though it was the highway to Brasilia and the interior. Maintenance was generally bad and at certain places the jungle seemed about ready

to recapture the narrow strip cut through its heart.

We had rested part of the afternoon in preparation for the drive, but the monotony of the trip soon wore on all of us. We drove through the night and slept twice the next day during the hottest time: once in the car sitting up, which didn't work because of the mosquitoes and the heat, and again in a dirty hotel in a small village. We drove again that night and arrived at Paracatu the following morning.

It was a whitewashed village of several thousand people that had a town square and numerous cantinas. We didn't stop there because we didn't want to attract attention. It would be logical for Stavros' men to entertain themselves by visiting the village, and one of them might become suspicious of white strangers.

The road to the plantation, if it could be called a road, was five miles beyond Paracatu. It was a dirt road with deep ruts that cut into the jungle almost imperceptibly at a ninety-degree angle to the highway. The car moved slowly along with Zach behind the wheel. Branches from undergrowth scratched and pulled at the car and jabbed at us through the windows. Because we had to drive slowly, mosquitoes swarmed into the car and bit us on any exposed flesh. CIA's Thompson had informed me that the plantation was almost ten miles off the road. We intended to drive about halfway up the road, and it took almost an hour to get that far. Luckily, we didn't meet any vehicles coming out, for

we didn't want any open confrontations at that point.

At about six miles in from the highway, we found a place where we could pull the BMW off the tiny road and into the undergrowth so that it was quite well hidden. As soon as we got out, we were attacked by the insects. We sprayed on some repellent and started walking.

There was a tall eucalyptus tree about a half mile from Adrian Stavros' rambling ranch-style mansion. The tree stood on the perimeter of the cleared land very near a high wire fence in an area that had apparently once been part of the grounds but which had since been reclaimed by the jungle. The tree had been used by the CIA as an observation post for some time. It was this tree to which I was leading Erika and Zach as we trudged through the damp, sticky heat. We moved at about the same speed as the car had and arrived there in less than an hour. Up in the top of the tree, hidden from view from the plantation, was a bamboo platform secured to the branches with pandanus strands. There were bamboo steps attached to the trunk and branches at various points to make the climb easier.

"Are we going up there?" Erika asked.

I slapped at a mosquito. "If it's any consolation, there probably won't be any bugs that high."

"Then let's go up and stay a week," Zach said. His blond hair was matted on his forehead, and

his khaki shirt, like all our clothes, was stained with sweat.

I grinned at him. His whole attitude had changed since Erika had set him straight, and he seemed to accept the fact that she was not attracted to him physically. I looked at the Smith & Wesson .38 revolver resting in its belt holster on his waist and was glad I had him along. Erika was a smart agent, but Zach was muscle. He was a gun expert and had brought a case of assorted weapons along with him in the car.

We climbed the tree. About halfway to the top, I began having a new respect for the CIA agents who had had to do this regularly during their recent concentrated surveillance. When we arrived at the platform, we were exhausted. Erika was still nervous from the climb and from the height at which she now found herself.

"God, was it worth it?" she gasped.

I grabbed a pair of high-powered binoculars from around my neck and looked through them toward the plantation. Then I pointed to it. "What do you think?" I asked.

She looked at what Zach and I had already seen—an open view through the leaves of the entire farm area. From this point an observer, with the help of binoculars, could see what was going on anywhere on the plantation. Besides the main building, which was the ranch house, there was a cluster of other buildings around it, most of them to the rear, which looked like barracks structures and service buildings. It was an impressive set-up. The fenced area was entirely

planted with trees and shrubs, and there were dirt drives and parking areas. Outside the fence lay an area that used to be planted with rubber trees when a previous owner had lived there, but the jungle had strangled them.

Erika had the binoculars and was scanning the place. "You were right, Nick. The mosquitoes can't fly this high." She sighed happily.

"Maybe we're going about this all wrong," Zach said after a while. "With that scope-sighted rifle I have in the car, I could sit up here and pick off Stavros' men all day. With you down at the fence pitching in, as you Americans say, we might be able to demolish them before we ever get inside."

"How are you going to get them all outside?" I asked. "And, having gotten them out, how do we keep them out there while we're picking them off?"

"Also," Erika added, "if we attack from outside, there is every chance they will get to Minourkos before we do and kill him."

"That's true," I said. "And if they kill him, we may not learn anything here."

"It's true that we can't jeopardize Minourkos," Zach agreed. "But I could make excellent use of the rifle up here. It seems such a pity."

Zach was just a little too eager to kill, I thought. It was too much like a hunting trip to him. I intended to dispose of anybody who really got in the way, but I saw no point in killing unnecessarily. You could not judge, sen-

tence, and execute every man down there just because he happened to work for Stavros.

We watched the plantation for the next several hours, until mid-afternoon, taking turns with the binoculars. The CIA had estimated the small force at the place to be about a half dozen and no more than eight. From spending those hours on the platform, seeing men come and go, our own observation confirmed that conclusion. We would be outnumbered by at least two to one when the confrontation developed.

We didn't see Minourkos until just before leaving the platform. Then his presence at the place was verified. He came out of a barracks building with another man, walked to the front entrance of the ranch house and went in. I had the binoculars on him all the time, and when he disappeared inside there was no doubt in my mind that the man I had seen was Nikkor Minourkos. At least we had not come here on a wild goose chase.

Just before we climbed back down the tree, I reiterated our plan of entry.

"All right," I said, "We'll go back to the car and drive right up to the place as if we're Stavros' best friends. Let me do the talking to the man on the gate. We'll say we're from the Brazilian League, and when we get inside we'll insist on seeing Heinz Gruber, the man in charge during Stavros' absence. I just hope they don't already know what I look like here at the plantation."

Erika opened a shoulder purse and removed a

small snub-nosed Belgian revolver, a .25 caliber. It was a beautiful little gun with a pearl handle and fancy engraving. I knew she could shoot it from my past association with her. She checked its cylinder and replaced it in her purse.

"Everything will go all right," she said.

Zach was eager to go. "We will handle them," he said.

"Yes," I agreed. I wished I were all that sure.

FIVE

We drove the last fifty yards to the gate slowly. The man on duty there was already watching our approach. He was dressed in khakis like us, with a folding, automatic rifle slung on his shoulder. He took it off and readied it for action as he watched us come.

"If we don't get past this fellow, the ball game is over," I said to them. "So play it cool." Erika nodded.

"Yes," Zach added. He had his lightweight bush jacket back on, as I did, to hide his weapons. Mine were the usual, but Zach had an assortment that was incredible. In addition to the .38 revolver, he carried a small Sterling .380 PPL automatic in his pocket and had also secreted a throwing knife and garrote on his person. He was a walking arsenal. I hoped it kept him alive.

We stopped just ten feet from the guard. I was behind the wheel, so I spoke to him loudly and forcefully in English. "Hello, there!"

The guard came over near my window. He was a mean-looking young man with a heavy

scar across his left jaw. He didn't return my smile.

"What is it you want here?" he demanded, looking into the car suspiciously. "You are trespassing on private property."

"Hey, really!" I said. "Don't use that on us. We're friends of Adrian Stavros."

He studied my face carefully. "I have not seen you before. Who are you?"

I gave him our made-up names. "We're from Rio," I said casually. "The Brazilian League." The League was an underworld group in Rio that rivaled Stavros with its smuggling activities. AXE had reason to believe that Stavros had tried to consolidate them into his group recently, with Stavros heading the whole thing.

"If you're from the League, what are you doing here?" the guard asked.

"Stavros invited us," I said. "And you're making me very impatient. I'll mention that to Stavros."

He gave me a look. "Stavros is not here at the plantation. He is on a business trip."

"He said he might be. He told us to see Heinz Gruber."

My knowledge of Stavros' lieutenant's name impressed the man. He rubbed a hand across his chin thoughtfully. "All right, wait here."

He returned to the gate while we watched his every move. Under a small canopy, he picked up what looked like an army surplus walkie-talkie from a wooden table. He spoke into it for a cou-

ple of minutes, listened, and then put it back down and returned to the car.

"You may enter. Drive to the area just in front of the house and park. You will be met outside."

"Very well," I said.

The guard opened the wire gate. I took a long look at the gun under his arm. That might have to be reckoned with yet. He waved me through the gate, and I put the car in gear.

"Here we go," I said to Erika and Zach.

We drove through the gate, and it was closed behind us. Zach grinned as he watched the gate being locked. I drove along a dirt drive to the compound. It was quite a place, all archways, red tiles, and bougainvillea. I pulled to a stop in front of the sprawling adobe house, and we got out of the car just as four men came out. We put the car between us and the guard at the gate.

The men who confronted us were a rough-looking lot. Three of them, the ones who emerged first, wore khakis and each wore a gun openly on his hip. One was a stocky, dark-complexioned man who appeared to be Brazilian. The second was a tall, thin fellow with a young John Carradine look, and the third looked like an American hippy with long hair and a beard. I didn't like his face. The fourth man was dressed in an open white shirt and tailored trousers. He was a tall, well-built man with graying hair and a square, hard face. He had to be the ex-Nazi, Gruber.

The three underlings fanned out, so they pretty well flanked us. I was glad we had placed the car between ourselves and the guard at the gate who was about thirty yards away.

"Herr Gruber?" I motioned my head to the white-shirted man.

"That is correct," he answered haughtily in a thick accent. He wore a Luger like mine in a belt holster. "And what is this about seeing Adrian Stavros?"

Zach and the longhair were sizing each other up. The stocky Stavros man appeared to be itching to draw the gun on his hip, and the tall, slim fellow couldn't take his eyes off Erika.

"He invited us here," I answered casually. "We offered him a load of uncut heroin. A couple of our dealers are in trouble and can't handle it. Surely he mentioned it to you?"

Gruber studied me for a moment. "No," he said. "You are an American. I did not know there were any Americans working for the League."

"You live and learn," I said.

"And what are you?" he asked Erika.

"A Jew," she said flatly.

His eyes narrowed on her, and he grinned harshly. "Very interesting," he remarked, looking from Erika to Zach. "Well, perhaps we might deal. We will get out of the sun, *ja*?"

"That sounds like a good idea," I said. I hoped somehow to separate Gruber from the others once we were inside.

But that was not the way it was to be. Sud-

denly a fifth man emerged from the house; our eyes met, and we recognized each other immediately. It was Ubeda from the Apex Imports office.

"What is going on here?" he asked Gruber. "That is the man who came snooping around in town. I sent a man after him who did not come back."

Gruber's eyes narrowed on me as the longhaired fellow cautiously drew his revolver. "Ach, so," Gruber said to himself. His eyes flicked from my face to the tense ones of Erika and Zach, then back to mine. "Who are you really?"

I looked from Ubeda to Gruber. The other gunmen hadn't drawn their weapons yet. "I'm who I said I was. So are we all. Now, do you want to deal or not?"

"Why did he come to Apex posing as a legitimate importer?" Ubeda asked. "Does he still say he wants Japanese cameras?"

"No," Gruber said slowly. "Not exactly. You may come inside, Mr.—"

"Johnson," I said.

"Mr. Johnson. But we must check first to see whether you are armed."

From the corner of my eye I could see the hard look Zach shot at me. He wasn't about to let these men disarm him, and I was of the same inclination. If they succeeded in doing so, none of us would probably ever leave the place alive. I gave Zach a glance that I hoped told him I was with him.

"All right, Herr Gruber," I said. I started to reach for Wilhelmina, my 9mm Luger.

"Ahh!" Gruber said, stopping me. "I will take it, Mr. Johnson."

That was the way I had hoped he would do it. Just as he reached into my jacket, I grabbed him and twisted him around in a tight grip under his chin. Longhair aimed at my head, and Zach drew his .38. Longhair shifted his aim from me to Zach and fired just as Zach dropped into a crouch; the slug zinged off the BMW behind us. Zach's gun answered in a staccato roar and hit Longhair full in the chest, driving him back against a stucco column that supported an archway at the entrance of the building. He gaped widely for a brief moment and died before he hit the ground.

Then a lot of things happened simultaneously or in rapid succession. I yelled at Zach to hold his fire, but it was too late. He had set everything into violent motion. The stocky man and the tall one went for their guns, as did Erika. Ubeda turned and started running for the house, and Zach fired, hitting him in the spine. Ubeda yelled and fell on his face in the dust.

"Hold it or I'll kill Gruber," I threatened to the other gunmen. I had let Hugo, the stiletto, slip into my hand and now held it tight against Gruber's throat. I could hear a loud yell of excitement from the gate guard behind me.

The tall thin man stopped his draw, but the stocky one had his revolver already out and had Zach beat. Kneeling low beside the sedan, Erika

was bringing the snub-nosed revolver from her purse. The stocky gunman fired and hit Zach in the chest. Zach spun around in a tight circle and hit hard against the back fender of the car.

Erika aimed and fired the Belgian snub-nose, and the stocky gunman grabbed at his abdomen and screamed. His revolver went off twice more into the dirt as he pitched sideways onto his shoulder to the ground.

Gruber gained confidence from all this and, while my attention was diverted, grabbed at my knife arm and managed to pry it away from his throat. In the same movement he kicked backwards at my left leg and connected on my calf and shin. I grunted and my hold on him weakened. Then he was sliding from my grasp, twisting the knife arm as he went. Hugo slipped from me as we both fell to the ground beside the car.

Seeing all this, the tall man hit the ground as he drew his weapon. Erika fired at him, but the shot went wild. He returned the fire and dented metal on the car beside her shoulder. I saw that she was in trouble. I slugged Gruber and he fell on his back away from me. Grabbing the stiletto from the dirt behind us, I hurled it in an underhand motion toward the tall man as he aimed at Erika again. The stiletto hit him in the chest, thudding into him almost silently. His eyes went big and the gun went off and dug up dirt between us. He fell down, grabbing at the hilt of the knife.

I could hear the gate being opened behind us

as Gruber's hands clawed at my face. I hit him hard again and heard bone snap in his jaw. My other fist rammed into his face and broke his nose. He fell unconscious underneath me.

"Look out!" Zach's weak voice came to us. I turned and saw that the shot had not killed him. He was struggling to his feet and looking toward the gate.

"Get down!" I ordered Erika, who was very near me beside the black sedan.

The guard aimed the submachine gun our way. Zach got up and pointed his weapon at the man, but the guard beat him. A fusillade of shots clattered from the automatic gun, digging up dirt beyond Zach and then hitting him in the chest before they began careening off the metal of the car. Erika and I kept low as Zach hit the dust on his back, dead.

I rolled over twice to the end of the car, to a position up under the front bumper, pulling out my Luger as I went. When I got there, the guard was just starting to rake back the other way with the gun. I fired three quick shots at him, bracing my gun hand with the other. The slugs from the Luger struck the fence in back of him, the guard's groin, and his chest, in that order. The automatic weapon blasted at the cobalt sky as he pitched backwards into the dust. Then, suddenly, there was silence in the compound.

I lay there getting my breath. In the jungle somewhere a bird shrieked its outrage at the noise we had made. I was covered with dust and dirt. I rose slowly and helped Erika to her feet.

She was gazing at Zach bewilderedly; her face was white.

I turned to Gruber and saw that he was coming around. I bent down and slapped him a few times, and he gazed up at me drunkenly. He groaned. I stuck the Luger into his face. "How many men in the house guarding Minourkos?" I demanded.

He tried to speak but found it difficult with a dislocated jaw. "I—can't—"

I stuck the Luger up under his chin. "How many?"

Weakly he held up two fingers. I turned to Erika. "Stay here and watch him."

She nodded numbly.

I went to the entrance of the house. The wide, arched doorway was open. I stepped into a large entrance foyer just in time to run head-on into a dark-faced man with an automatic in his fist. I fired my Luger, and it roared in the hall. The man smashed up against the wall beside him. He then fell in a cumbersome heap across a small table, demolishing it as he hit the floor.

The man had come from a long corridor to my left. I went down the hallway quickly but cautiously. I couldn't delay in finding Minourkos, or he would surely be dead when I finally did. It might be that they had already killed him.

The doors off the corridor, which I presumed were bedrooms, were all open except one at the end. I heard a small sound inside as I stopped in front of it. Taking a deep breath, I stepped back

and kicked the door savagely. It crashed inward, and I went through the opening.

A very skinny, ugly man stood over Minourkos, who was bound to a straight-back chair, aiming a gun at his head. His finger on the trigger, he whirled to face me when the door crashed open. He fired first, but wildly, and the slug chewed up wood in the door casing beside me. I fired the Luger and hit him in the chest. He spun off his feet and dropped to the floor. But he hadn't lost his gun. He aimed at me again. I beat him that time and hit him in the face, the slug blowing the side of his head away.

Minourkos stared at his dead captor with a dazed expression as I holstered my Luger. Slowly he looked over at me.

"Nikkor Minourkos?" I asked.

"Yes," he answered quietly. "Who are—"

"We have come to free you, Mr. Minourkos," I said.

He let out a shaky breath. "Thank God. He was going to—"

"I know." I untied him and he rose from the chair, rubbing his wrists.

"Are you all right?" I asked, concerned.

"Yes, I will be fine." He shook his head and muttered something in Greek. "I can't believe it is really over."

"Well, most of it is."

I was starting to ask him to tell his story when I heard the shot from the compound. I remembered Erika out there with the German. I turned and rushed into the hall. "Erika!"

In a moment she answered me. "I'm all right." Before I could move toward the front foyer, she suddenly rounded the corner and walked casually toward me, stuffing the Belgian revolver into her purse.

"What the hell happened?" I asked.

"Gruber met an untimely demise." Her eyes avoided mine.

"You shot him?" I asked, almost unbelievably.

"He started mumbling with his dislocated jaw. When I asked him what he was saying, he called me a dirty Jew and said I should have been with the others he saw die at Dachau. He did not think Jews should be allowed to live in the same world with people like himself. So I sent him to another world. I hope it is warm enough for him down there."

Finally the green eyes looked up into mine, defiantly, daring me to say something. I remembered that relatives of her parents had been put to death by the Nazis at Buchenwald. Somehow I could think of nothing to say in defense of Heinz Gruber.

"Come on in and meet Mr. Minourkos," I said.

We went into the room, and Erika stared at the corpse on the floor. Minourkos was leaning against a nearby wall. He straightened when he saw Erika.

"Miss Erika Nystrom," I introduced them. "Of Israeli intelligence."

Minourkos' eyes narrowed. He looked over at me. "And you?"

"The name is Carter. Nick Carter. I'm employed by the US government in the same capacity as Miss Nystrom. We came here to free you and to get Adrian Stavros."

Minourkos moved away from the wall. "I see. Well, Mr. Carter, the first thing I want as a free man is contact with the authorities." His tone had taken on that of a business tycoon speaking to his subordinates. "Then I will deal with Adrian Stavros in my own way."

"Mr. Minourkos," I said slowly, "there is absolutely no reason for you to do anything at this point. All that can result is a bundle of red tape and delay. I would prefer that you let us handle it."

"How do I know you are who you claim to be?" He sounded annoyed.

"You know that we risked our lives to free you. As a matter of fact, we lost a man," I answered acidly. "I would think that would give us the benefit of the doubt."

His face sagged from sudden weariness. "You're right. Please forgive me. I have been through a great deal."

"As for your handling Stavros alone, Mr. Minourkos," I continued, "that's pretty impractical. The man has an army around him."

Minourkos raised his eyebrows and blew his cheeks out. "All right, all right, Mr. Carter. I will go along with you and the girl. But if I see, at any point along the way, that your methods are not working I will take command of the situation."

I smiled briefly. "That sounds fair," I replied. "Were you abducted from Athens by Stavros?"

Minourkos got the straight-back chair he had been sitting on when I broke into the room. He sat down on it, facing us.

"You would not believe the cleverness of the man," he began slowly. "I do not consider myself an innocent, Mr. Carter, but I have never met anyone like Adrian Stavros. I had been pursuing the idea of building a fleet of computer-run, underwater oil tankers. Stavros found out about this and wanted to help me with it—or so he said.

"At first I would not even see him, but he sent me a letter outlining some very good ideas. I finally invited him to my penthouse in Athens. We had a long talk.

"‘Mr. Minourkos,’ I recall him saying to me, ‘I have the same plan as you. If you will just allow me, I will make you immortal in the annals of shipping history.’ He was very persuasive.

"‘But, Mr. Stavros,’ I said, ‘there are complex engineering problems to be solved.’

"‘I have two engineers who can do it,’ he told me. Underneath the charm, even then, I saw something else in the man’s face, something I did not like, but I passed it off as undue excitement about the project."

"Did he bring the engineers to you?" I asked.

"Oh, yes. They had imaginative ideas, too. I was convinced that they might have the skills to make it all happen. At that point, Mr. Carter, I

let my guard down. He asked for a private meeting at the penthouse and I granted it. There were only my personal secretary and another aide present. He brought two men with him that I had not seen previously."

"Is that when it happened?" Erika asked.

"Well, at first I suspected nothing," Minourkos said, his face ashen as he remembered. "Then, almost without warning, Stavros asked my aides to go into another room. One of Stavros' men followed. There were two gunshots." Minourkos fell silent.

"He murdered them right there?" I asked.

"In cold blood. His henchmen knocked me down and kicked me almost unconscious. They took me into that other room and made me look at the bloody bodies. I will never forget it.

"Salaka, my secretary, lay in a pool of his own blood. The other fellow's face was blown off. Stavros said I could expect the same thing if I did not cooperate."

"What happened after that?"

"The next day they brought in a man who looked exactly like Salaka Madoupas. The man even spoke like Salaka and affected all his mannerisms. It was incredible, really incredible. It was like an awful nightmare."

"Did they have a man to impersonate you?" Erika asked.

"No, they did not have to. I am rarely seen, except by close business associates. They brought in a recorder and played several tapes of my voice that they had recorded without my

knowledge at previous meetings. Stavros pointed a gun at my head and said he could kill me right there and nobody would know for a very long time. But, he said, I would live if I did not give them too much trouble. They needed me, he said, for further recordings and for putting letters and such into my own words and thoughts. So they put me aboard a private plane and abducted me to this Godforsaken place."

"Did Stavros tell you what he was going to do?" Erika asked, perplexed.

Minourkos grunted out a dry laugh. "He was quite candid. He said that they intended to overthrow the government of Greece in my name, that they would call upon my friends in the military and other fields by using the man who was impersonating my secretary to make phone calls and personal contacts. Because I have been a private person, nobody would think it unusual that I did not meet personally with them. And if someone insisted on seeing me, they might fly me to Athens and force me to meet with him and say things that they wanted me to say.

"They showed me another man who could forge my signature exactly. This man would write checks on my various accounts and spend my money for military *coups* that they were going to organize."

"Did he give you any details?" I asked.

"Mr. Stavros, whom I am ashamed to admit has Greek ancestry, spoke freely to me, both in Athens and here. He said his plan is divided into

three parts. First, he intends to get rid of the ruling junta and place men in power who feel an allegiance to me. They will feel this allegiance not because they are friends, for most of them will not be, but because Stavros will have promised them power and glory in my name."

"Very clever," I remarked.

"Secondly, his plan will involve forcing these new generals and colonels to demand that I, Nikkor Minourkos, be named president with full power over the junta. Stavros indicated that I might be used for this part of the plan, since my privacy would have to be abandoned at that point. That is, I would be used if it was clear that Stavros could trust me to keep quiet about what was really going on. If not, he would find another imposter, this time for me."

"It would work, too," Erika commented. "Very few people know your face well enough to detect a slight difference between your features and those of an imposter."

"Exactly," Minourkos said. "It's incredible that my pursuit of privacy has contributed to this horror. Anyway, the third phase of the plan would involve using me or the imposter as president of Greece for a short time, during which period I would appoint Stavros vice president. He would be a citizen by then and his name would have been gradually introduced to the people of Greece. He would then be seen as the hero behind the *coup*. Then, announcing ill health, I would step down in favor of Stavros as president."

Minourkos fell silent. "It's wild," I said,

"What makes Stavros think that the Greeks will stand by and watch something like that happen?"

"Why not?" Minourkos asked, his face lined with fatigue. "Remember what happened in April, 1967, when the junta was formed? That was not a bloody *coup*, but it was a *coup*. The government of the king was overthrown by force. Many articles of the constitution were suspended by the junta's decree. It is ironic, is it not, that a man like this appears just when the constitution has been restored and when the junta has become more moderate and is setting up general elections for next year. If Stavros' plan to grab power succeeds, Greece could end up with a tyranny more complete than Hitler's or Stalin's."

Erika looked from Minourkos to me. "Then we must stop him, mustn't we?"

Minourkos studied Erika's face. "Yes. We must!" The stout Greek stood up and thrust his square chin forward. "This man is even using my family against my homeland. He boasts that my brother-in-law, General Vassilis Kriezotou, thinks I am behind this ugly plot and has thrown his support behind it because he thinks I want it. Yes, I will help you in any way I can. What do we do first?"

"We go to Athens," I said. "That's where we find and stop Stavros."

SIX

Less than forty-eight hours later we arrived in the capital of Greece. I booked adjoining rooms in a small hotel called the Odeon at 42 Pireos, just a short distance from Omonia Square. The weather was balmy and a pleasant relief from the heat of Paracatu.

The newspapers in Athens were full of commentary on the quickly changing political scene. News had sifted back from Rhodesia that my friend Alexis Salomos had been killed, and speculation was rife. It was generally known that there had been an attempt on his life before he had left for Rhodesia. One paper in particular, however, had avoided any mention of the death of Salomos. It was also running regular editorials denouncing the leadership of the ruling junta, attacking a leading general or colonel in almost every issue. Salomos had mentioned to me that this publisher was unscrupulous and had been the first to support the original hard-line junta after the *coup* in 1967.

"It is quite clear that the publisher has been bought off with my money," Minourkos remarked,

sitting on a reclining chair in my room on the sunny afternoon of our arrival. "And look at this headline in another paper: MINOURKOS DECRIES JUNTA COMMUNIST AFFILIATIONS. Mr. Stavros has been busy."

Erika took a cup of thick Greek coffee from a tray that had been brought to us and served it to Minourkos. He accepted it with a somber face. Erika took a cup herself and sat beside me on a short sofa.

"I just hope nobody has seen you yet," I said to Minourkos, "particularly one of his men. Your life wouldn't be worth a drachma if Stavros learned you were here in Athens."

"He will find out as soon as he contacts Paracatu," Minourkos reminded me.

"Yes, but that might not be for several days, if we're lucky. And even then he wouldn't know definitely that something was wrong without sending somebody there from Rio. That somebody would have to be a subordinate because Ubeda is dead."

"What do we do first, Nick?" Erika asked. "We can't just storm the penthouse the way we did the plantation. It will be too well protected."

"I could place a call to the penthouse," Minourkos suggested, "to see how they are handling contacts with outsiders. But they would recognize my voice."

I handed him a napkin from the tray. "Raise the tone of your voice and speak through this. Tell them you want to speak to yourself. When they refuse, ask for your secretary, Salaka

Madoupas. Tell them you are a visiting newspaper editor from Salonika, and you would like a statement about Nikkor Minourkos' political ambitions."

Minourkos smiled at my plan, then he put the call through. He placed the napkin over his mouth and tried to change his voice. In a moment he was speaking to someone at the penthouse. He asked for Nikkor Minourkos, and then listened to their excuse. He asked to speak to Madoupas. There was more talk and he insisted. Then he was speaking to the man who was posing as Madoupas, an Athenian actor whose real name, Stavros had told Minourkos, was Yianis Tzanni. Minourkos asked the questions about himself and waited for the pat answers and then asked if he might make a date for a personal interview with Mr. Minourkos. He was refused, and the conversation was over. He hung up and looked at us.

"It is like a bad dream," he said. "It is as if I really am at the penthouse and Madoupas is answering the phone for me as he always did. They know my habits well. And this Tzanni's voice is exactly that of my dead friend Salaka."

"Who answered the phone first?" I asked.

"Some young man. He was not a Greek. Probably one of Stavros' hoodlums."

"It sounds as if they're well entrenched," Erika said.

"Yes, it does," I agreed. "With all of Athens thinking it's Nikkor Minourkos up there in that penthouse, it's a serious situation. Stavros may

even have police protection up there. Or soldiers from his growing private army."

"If I just go to the police, or to the junta itself, and tell them what happened," Minourkos said, "they will have to believe me. Even if they think I have suddenly gone mad, they will be obligated to check out my story. They will then find out what has happened."

"It could be dangerous," Erika said.

"She's right," I agreed. "At this point, we don't know how many friends Stavros had made in his own name. Anyway, if we just throw this out into the open, we'll force Stavros to make a move—probably a big one. He might just decide to try a *coup* without your name behind it. He has a military group in readiness and a lot of ambitious military leaders around him who don't care who is behind a takeover. And even if he made a move and failed, there would be blood spilled. A lot of it. No, Mr. Minourkos. We're going to sneak up on Stavros. In my country, this is the part we call in-fighting. Erika here has orders to execute Stavros, and so do I. If our mission succeeds, that's exactly what will happen to him. If it fails the authorities will be much more civilized with him. And God help you if they can't stop him in time."

"All right, Mr. Carter," Minourkos said. "I put myself in your capable hands. How do we *sneak up* on Mr. Stavros?"

I smiled at Erika, and she returned it. "I think you mentioned that Stavros boasted about

using one of your relatives, a brother-in-law named Kriezotou who's a general in the army?"

"Yes," Minourkos said. "He is not a strong man, I must say. He married my younger sister before I had made my fortune, and they have a fine marriage. But Vassilis would have remained at some lesser rank in the army if it had not been for my influence. He feels indebted to me, rightfully, for what he has in life. So it would be natural for him to go along with any scheme I would propose.

"Stavros found this out. He is a thorough man, Mr. Carter, a man not to be taken lightly. He must have made a tape of some kind to play to Vassilis on the telephone, and then sent the man posing as Salaka Madoupas, my secretary. The imposter must have then convinced Vassilis that I was depending on him."

"Do you know how Stavros may have used the general?"

"He hinted that Vassilis would be asked to organize and train a secret force of soldiers and to convince other military men to join the conspiracy."

"Yes," I mused. "Very neat. Does your brother-in-law live here in Athens?"

"He does," Minourkos said. "On the outskirts of the city to the north."

"Will you take us to him?" I asked.

"It will be my pleasure," Minourkos replied.

I called a cab, and we drove out to General Kriezotou's residence in the early evening. I made Minourkos wear a hat that covered part of

his face until we got there. The general's house was a small mansion in a rich suburb of Athens, with a winding gravel drive to the house. I was impressed with what Minourkos could do for an ordinary man.

When the general met us at the door, Minourkos removed the hat. Kriezotou just stared for a very long moment. Then he threw his arms wide to embrace Minourkos.

"Nikkor!" he exclaimed, clasping Minourkos warmly. He was a tall, gray-haired man with a kind of De Gaulle face and soft eyes. He was wearing a tan uniform with braid on the shoulders and ribbons strung across the front.

"*Kali mera sas*, Vassilis," Minourkos said warmly, returning the embrace. "*Sigha, sigha*. It is all right."

"It is so good for you to visit," Vassilis said. "Come. Come in." His gesture included all of us.

We stepped into a large hall with a winding staircase at its rear and urns decorating its walls. The general then led us into an oak-paneled library with thick carpeting and many soft leather chairs. We all sat down, and the general asked if we cared for a drink, which we declined. Minourkos introduced Erika and me by our last names only.

"This is a great shock, Nikkor," Kriezotou said. "I wish Anna were here. She is visiting her cousin in Piraeus."

"It is perhaps better this way, Vassilis," Minourkos said.

"*Dhen katalave no*," Kriezotou remarked. "Is everything all right with you? You appear pale."

"I am fine," Minourkos answered. "Thanks to these people."

The general glanced at us. "Nikkor, all this has been so strange. Your refusing to see me when you started your—may I speak freely?"

"Yes, freely," Minourkos said.

"Well, I did not understand your asking help in such an important mission without a personal meeting. Frankly, I have been quite upset about all this. I am not convinced of the advisability of a—"

"Coup?" Minourkos completed the sentence.

Kriezotou glanced at us again. "Well, yes." He kneaded his big knuckles. "I have given instructions to the men at the special camps at Delphi and Mykonos, and I have persuaded Adelfia and others that your new cause is just, but—"

"But you don't believe it yourself?" Minourkos asked hopefully.

Kriezotou lowered his head. "*Me sinhori te*, Nikkor," he said. "I am sorry, but I do not think Greece needs another *coup*. I have done what you asked, but I have wanted to speak with you about all this, person to person, from the beginning those many weeks ago."

"Do not worry, Vassilis," Minourkos said in a soothing voice. "I do not wish a *coup*."

Kriezotou's face registered shock for the second time in a brief period. "No?" he said. "You have changed your mind?"

"Vassilis, I have to explain something to you,

and I want you to listen carefully," Minourkos said.

Kriezotou sat back in a big chair and listened as Minourkos told him the whole story. Kriezotou did not interrupt once, although incredulity passed across his big face a few times. When Minourkos was finished, Kriezotou just sat there and shook his head slowly. He reached into a pocket and produced a string of worry beads and began thumbing them through his fingers.

"Incredible!" he finally said.

"But true," Minourkos said.

"General, we're here to stop this man for good, and we need your help. Only you can give us last minute inside information on Stavros," I said.

Kriezotou finally got hold of himself. "Of course," he agreed. "I will do everything I can. I am so relieved that Nikkor is not behind this!

"A smear campaign is in progress through one newspaper, and most of it is directed against Colonel Anatole Kotsikas. It has even been suggested that Kotsikas is a traitor and owes his allegiance to Moscow. This is not true. Kotsikas is liberal, but he is not a Communist. He is the moving force behind the recent political reforms and the sponsor of the forthcoming general elections."

"Anybody else?" I asked.

Kriezotou sighed. "Yes. The attacks have also been directed against the men who generally vote with Kotsikas—Colonels Plotarchou and Glavani. In fact, the man who poses as your

secretary, Nikkor, came to me recently with the information that all three of these men are to be—murdered.”

Erika and I exchanged looks. Stavros was getting down to his business. His kind of business.

“Do you know anything specific?” I asked Kriezotou.

“Well, a little. I was asked to arrange for a meeting of these three men with yourself, Nikkor. But then the man I thought was your secretary called. He said that they were arranging the meeting for the penthouse. I believe it is at this meeting that an attempt will be made on the lives of the three colonels.”

“We have to find out exactly what Stavros has planned and when,” I said.

“Yes,” Kriezotou agreed. “I have been absolutely frantic about this. I could not believe that you wanted this.”

“It will all be well,” Minourkos assured him.

I wished I could agree with him. It appeared Stavros was on the verge of a bloody takeover, and we had to stop him before it happened. “Call the junta leader Kotsikas and try to find out whether the Stavros people have contacted him,” I said to Kriezotou. “Don’t mention the possibility of assassination yet.”

“Very well,” Kriezotou replied. “Kotsikas may talk to me. I will certainly try.”

“And you, Mr. Minourkos,” I said, “are going to be able to help, too. You can get in touch with the leaders of the two bases where Stavros’ military groups are being kept. I suspect that if

the Athenians were to give Stavros any trouble when this multiple assassination is supposed to occur, Stavros would try to move these special troops to Athens very quickly to quell any reaction. I would like you to tell the leaders at these camps to stay there and not to move their troops unless they hear from you personally."

"Very well, Mr. Carter," Minourkos agreed.

"It's pretty clear that Stavros cannot just kill these men without some subterfuge." I looked over at Kriezotou. "Do you think he might try to make the whole thing appear an accident or the work of some radical political group?"

Kriezotou arched his graying brows. "Either that, Mr. Carter, or he will try to throw some dirt on them in the way of propaganda just before he kills them so that they will have lost the sympathy of the people."

SEVEN

The three of us returned to the hotel. Minourkos had wanted to stay with Kriezotou, but I had been afraid that would be too dangerous. If for any reason Stavros distrusted Kriezotou, he might storm into the general's residence without warning. I didn't want him to find Minourkos there if he did.

We had a meal sent to Minourkos' room and afterwards Erika and I went to her room. We soon got around to discussing Stavros.

"I just can't sit here and wait to see what Stavros has in mind for the junta leaders," I said as we sat on a small sofa sipping brandy that Erika had ordered.

Erika moved against me. She kissed me gently on my cheek. "You can't just storm into the penthouse, as you yourself said," she commented. Her long hair glinted in the dim light.

"No," I said, moving a hand onto her thigh. I turned to her, and we kissed lightly. "But I can go to the penthouse and try to get inside. I might be able to get a look at their defensive set-up."

She kissed my cheek and neck, and a small chill, a pleasant one, inched along my flesh.

"How would we manage that?" she asked in that throaty voice while her hand started unbuttoning my shirt.

"We wouldn't," I corrected her. The hand was becoming very distracting. "I would go up there alone on some ruse."

A long, white thigh slid over my lap, and her dress hiked up exposing the beginning of a rich curve of buttocks. Her hips moved against me. "But I would like—to go with you."

The warm lips touched mine again. Her tongue moved delicately to my mouth, probing and seeking. Her right hand had moved much lower and found what it was after, and I couldn't think of Adrian Stavros anymore.

"I'm going alone," I whispered. "Tomorrow."

I reached into her dress and caressed her breasts. The sweeping curves were soft yet firm, pressing eagerly against my touch.

"All right, darling," Erika breathed into my ear.

"Good," I said softly. "No more arguments."

"Would I argue with you," she said, pressing her mouth to mine.

The kiss was a long one, and Erika was ready. When it was over, she began undressing me. I took over, and she got up and walked to the big double bed across the room. She pulled the dress off, then the bra and pink bikini panties. She was vibrant and beautiful. Every curve of her body was perfect. She flung herself onto the soft bed

and lay there waiting for me. I didn't delay. In another moment I was beside her on the bed, reaching and grasping and touching her body, feeling it melt against mine as the passion built in both of us.

"Oh, Nick," she said, touching me, her breath coming unevenly.

My hands found her roughly, and I moved over her. A few seconds later there were lovely sounds coming from her. She became a clawing, raging, primitive woman, losing all control as she thrust to accept fulfillment deep inside her.

Later, after Erika had fallen asleep, I left her bed and quietly went to my own room. She didn't awaken.

The next morning I left Erika and Minourkos at the hotel and went to the Apollo building. I had obtained a uniform from a local crew of window washers who worked regularly in the building and who were allowed access to the penthouse with a pass. Minourkos had helped me forge a pass and I had also blackened my hair at the hotel and pasted on a dark mustache so I would appear to be Greek. I lied to the guard outside, a uniformed building employee, saying that Madoupas had ordered the penthouse windows to be cleaned.

I couldn't even get on the special elevator until I had identified myself. The elevator operator was obviously one of Stavros' men. A gun bulged under his blue uniform. He eyed me and my pail suspiciously as we rose to the penthouse. No other elevator went up there and, according to

Minourkos, the one stairway leading down from the top floor was blocked off and guarded.

When I got off the elevator, I found myself in a plush corridor that ran from the front to the rear of the building. It had thick pile carpeting and planters and fancy chandeliers hanging from a high ceiling. Two guards sat at a desk at the entrance to the penthouse. They were Stavros' hired thugs, part of his personal army. Minourkos' own guards, who had been few, had to have been dismissed shortly after the secret takeover of the penthouse.

One of the two men, the taller, came to meet me in the middle of the corridor. He was anything but friendly.

"What is your business?" he demanded.

I responded in my best Greek. "Is my business not obvious?" I asked. "I come to wash windows."

"Who sent you?"

I pointed to a cloth patch on the uniform that bore the name of the small window washing business."

"Did your employer have orders from the penthouse?"

"If they didn't, I would not be here," I answered. I took a big gamble. "I heard Madoupas' name mentioned."

The other man scowled darkly from the table. He had light hair and a very tough look, and I figured him to be one of the men Stavros had brought with him from Brazil. As he studied my

face, I felt that he was seeing right through my disguise.

"Hmmpf," the man beside me grunted. "Turn to the wall and place your hands against it."

I had wondered how careful they would be about weapons. I had left Wilhelmina at the hotel and had taken Hugo, the stiletto, off my arm and strapped it to the inside of my right ankle. I hadn't wanted to go into the lion's den without any defense. I turned around and held my breath as the thug frisked me with expertise. After checking out my torso and arms, he worked slowly down my left leg to my knee. Then he moved down my right thigh toward the knife. He got to the knee and passed below it. My stomach tightened. He stopped just an inch or so above the handle of the stiletto.

"All right," he said. "Turn back and let me see your identification."

I pulled out the phony card, and he examined it carefully. Without saying anything, he took the card to the other man and showed it to him. The man finally nodded and the tall, dark one returned, handed the card back, and looked into the pail.

"All right. He will take you inside."

"Thank you," I said humbly.

The second man rose from the desk and studied me carefully as I went to meet him. I was beginning to feel that it would be easier and much less trouble to get into Fort Knox. He opened the door, and I preceded him into the interior of the penthouse.

I was inside the fortress at last. It was a formidable feeling, considering my vulnerability if they found me out. The chances were, if that happened, I would never leave the building alive. And the way Stavros chose to kill a spy might not be the most pleasant way to die.

We had entered a spacious living area. It was luxurious to a fault. Rich carpeting covered two levels of floor, and the high ceiling was painted with a mural depicting a scene from ancient Greece. On the far side of the room was a wall of glass overlooking the city, opening onto a small balcony by way of a sliding glass door. That was where I would begin my work. I turned and saw expensive furniture all around the room, much of it antique. Ancient urns rested gracefully on polished tables.

To my right through a partially open door I could see another room with desks and cabinets that apparently had been converted into an office by Stavros. To my left there was a corridor with rooms off it, apparently bedrooms and living quarters.

"I will begin on the large windows here," I said.

"You wait here," the man who ushered me in commanded.

I hunched my shoulders. "Of course."

He went into the office and disappeared for a moment. I moved to my right so that I could see the inside of the room better. There were several dark-suited men moving about and somebody talking on a telephone. It seemed to be a com-

munications center. There were probably a half dozen men in that one room. While I waited, two other men walked from the corridor into the big room where I was, gave me a look, and also went into the office. Stavros had plenty of people here—maybe a dozen or more at any given time. And there was little doubt that most of them wore guns and knew how to use them.

In a few minutes the man who ushered me in reappeared and returned to the corridor outside without speaking. He was followed out of the office by another man, one who wore his hair long and looked like a student radical who had outgrown his clothes and hair style. He was dressed sloppily and carried a big revolver openly on a shoulder holster over a fringed leather vest.

"How long does this take?" he asked in English.

I guessed that he, like the man at Paracatu, was an American. Stavros had taken a hard core of political activists with him.

I answered in broken English. "How long? Maybe half hour, maybe hour. Depends how dirty the windows."

"Madoupas doesn't remember calling you people." He peered at me through large, blue-lensed granny glasses. His face was slightly pockmarked, and his lips were very thin, almost non-existent. From AXE files I identified him as a crony of Stavros; he was known as Hammer, a real nice fellow who was believed to have murdered two women by strapping sticks of dynamite to their waists.

"No, he not call?" I took a scrap of paper from my pocket and studied it. "They tell me Mr. Minourkos' place."

At that moment another man came into the room and stood beside Hammer. He was rather short and dark and obviously Greek. I had seen a photo of Salaka Madoupas in the AXE files and this man looked exactly like him.

"I don't recall calling any window washers," he said in English for the benefit of Hammer. "When did you come here last?"

"I not recall without records," I answered nervously. "One must have records, you understand."

Hammer walked over to me arrogantly. "But you have been here before?"

I hesitated. "Yes, before."

He pulled the revolver and aimed it at my face. Its barrel was unpleasantly close. "Tell me what the kitchen looks like."

A trickle of perspiration broke loose under my left arm. I tried to recall the description of the kitchen that Minourkos had given me. "It is large with sink and cupboards! What is this anyway?"

"Oh, let him get started," the fake Madoupas said.

Hammer ignored him. "How many windows in the kitchen?"

I wondered how fast I could get to the stiletto if I dropped to the floor at his feet. But then I remembered that the kitchen was an interior room on the corridor of the building, not on the

outside wall. "Why, it has no windows," I said innocently.

Hammer's finger was tight against the trigger. Slowly the whiteness of the knuckles disappeared, and he dropped the gun to his side. A man in a short-sleeved shirt came from the office.

"The Plaka Service people say they sent a man over," the fellow reported to Hammer.

I tried to keep the relief in my face from showing. I had bribed the girl at the Plaka office to support my story if the need arose, but had worried whether she would really follow through.

Hammer holstered his gun. "Okay. Clean the damned windows," he ordered. "But make it fast."

"Yes, sir," I said. "Mr. Minourkos sometimes wishes to talk about our sailing days long ago. Will I see him before I leave?"

Hammer gave me a blistering glare. "You will not see him," he said. "Get on with your work."

"Thank you," I said.

They allowed me to go down the corridor to fill the pail with water, and I got a quick look at the physical layout of the suite. When I began on the big windows, everybody left me alone. I had seen what I had come for and was trying to think of a graceful way to cut my visit short when a group of men came from the office and began discussing Stavros' affairs openly without noticing me. I was on the balcony with the door open.

"Both camps are ready," one man said. "I

think we should recommend to Stavros that we make our move as soon as—”

Another man stopped him and pointed to me. The first man turned away and spoke again in hushed tones. At that instant, however, three other men came striding into the room from the interior corridor, and I was treated to the big bonus of my visit. The ramrod-straight man in the forefront was Adrian Stavros. He was of medium height with a receding line of dark hair. He looked very much like the photographs that I had seen, a rather ugly, hard-faced fellow who looked older than his thirty-odd years. But he was still a dynamic-looking man. He had a good breadth of shoulder and held himself like a West Point graduate. He was in shirtsleeves, a dark tie pulled down at the neck. He carried a sheaf of papers in his hand and seemed very tired.

“All right, let’s make this meeting brief,” he said to the others in the large room. I noticed that Tzanni wasn’t there. He wasn’t important enough in this organization. “Rivera, what’s the latest report from Mykonos?”

Standing there, looking at this small group, remembering how cleverly they operated, I almost felt respect for Adrian Stavros.

“... and the commander says that the ground-work is completed and the troops—”

Stavros suddenly looked up and saw me for the first time. He motioned toward an underling, took several steps in my direction, then stopped dead, raw anger in his face.

“Who the hell is *that*?” he bellowed.

One of Stavros' men came up to him apprehensively. "I believe somebody said he was here to wash the windows."

"You *believe*!" Stavros yelled loudly. He looked and saw my pail on the balcony beside me and the rubber-edged tool in my hand. "You! Get in here!" he ordered.

If Stavros was annoyed enough and decided he wanted to dispose of me, no one would question his judgment. I walked casually into the room. "Yes?"

He turned from me without answering. "Who let him in here?"

Hammer, standing in a corner, strode like a panther to the center of the room. "He's all right. We checked him out."

Stavros turned and glared hard at his gunman for a long moment while a black silence filled the room. When Stavros spoke, it was in a low voice. "Am I surrounded by idiots?"

Hammer gave him a sour look. Then he turned to me. "Okay, window washing is over for today."

"But I have just begin! Mr. Minourkos always want all windows washed. He say—"

"Goddamn it, leave!" Hammer screamed.

I shrugged. "My pail—"

"Forget it."

I walked quietly past Stavros, and he watched me all the way. On the way down to the street in the elevator, I made mental notes of the sound-proofing, the communication lines, and the locks that secured the doors of the small lift. I wondered

whether I had aroused Adrian Stavros' suspicions. My visit had certainly been worthwhile. I had not only gotten a good look at the man I hoped to kill, but I had also noted the physical layout of his fortress. The elevator was the only way of gaining entrance, and I knew what to expect when we got inside.

When I arrived back at the hotel, Erika and Minourkos were waiting for me in my room. As soon as I walked in the door and Erika saw that I was all right, she thrust a newspaper at me. I read the bold headline.

OFFICIAL ALLEGES KOTSIKAS CONSPIRACY

Minourkos clucked his tongue.

"Some cabinet member, a little known figure named Alikí Vianola, says he has evidence that Kotsikas plans a sell-out to the Communists and that the lives of other junta leaders are in danger."

I scanned the first column of print. "So it appears that the general's guess was right," I said. "Stavros throws a shovel of dirt at Kotsikas to confuse the issue just before the meeting in which he plans to murder him and his colleagues."

"And note how careful he is to keep my name out of it," Minourkos said heavily.

Erika put her arm through mine. "The police are looking into the charges, but by the time they are found to be groundless, the three colonels will be dead."

"Not if the general comes through for us," I said. "Has he called?"

"Not yet," Minourkos said. "Did you get into my place?"

"Yes, I made it," I answered. I told them of the bits of conversation I had overheard and of actually seeing Stavros.

"I wished you'd had a gun," Erika said bitterly.

"If I had had one I wouldn't have gotten in," I reminded her. "They searched me well. No, we'll have to go back. I wish we still had Zach."

Erika looked up at me. "He was very good at his job."

"Yes," I said. "Well, if we have to, I may be able to get help from my people. There's an AXE agent in this area, I think. I'll find out for sure." I turned to Minourkos. "Have you been able to get through to the camp commanders?"

"I reached both of them," he said. "I told them just what you said. Both men advised me that they would not make another move until they heard from me personally. I also advised them not to contact the penthouse and to disregard any contrary orders from my so-called secretary."

"You did very well, Mr. Minourkos," I said. "Now if we can find out—"

I was interrupted by the telephone.

Erika answered it, and the caller identified himself. She nodded and handed the phone to Minourkos. He took it and cradled the receiver to his ear. There was little dialogue from his

end. "Yes, Vassilis. Yes. Ah, yes. Yes, go on. I see. Yes. Ah, excellent." When he was finished and had replaced the receiver he looked up at us with a sly smile.

"Well?" Erika asked impatiently.

"Vassilis called the penthouse and Tzanni refused to see him either today or tomorrow on the excuse of being too busy. He suggested Vassilis call next week. There was an argument and an exchange of hot words, but Tzanni remained adamant. He also refused to discuss the colonels on the phone."

"So what did he do to make you smile?" I asked.

"Remember Despo Adelfia? The man who replaced Rasion on the committee of colonels? Stavros' own man?"

"Yes," Erika nodded.

"Vassilis went to this man. He suspected that Adelfia would be the one to engineer a meeting, and he was right. Adelfia knows the entire plan. Vassilis ranted about the three colonels and won Adelfia's confidence. Adelfia told him the time and place of the meeting. Kotsikas, Plotarchou, and Glavani have already agreed to meet with me at the residence of Kotsikas. He has a country estate north of the city in a rather remote area. Adelfia will be there, too."

"When?" I asked.

"This afternoon," Minourkos replied. "In just a few hours."

"How are the colonels to be assassinated?" I inquired.

Minourkos hunched his heavy shoulders. "Adelfia would not tell that part when he found that Vassilis did not know. We will have to wait and see, it seems."

"That could be extremely dangerous," I said. I glanced at the watch on my wrist. "Erika, call a cab. We're going out to Kotsikas' place. Mr. Minourkos, you stay here at the hotel and keep out of sight. If anybody recognizes you we're in trouble."

"Very well, Mr. Carter."

While Erika called a taxi, I removed my jacket and strapped on my Luger in its holster and then the stiletto on my right forearm. Minourkos watched silently and somberly. I took the Luger from the holster and pulled the slide ejector back, working a cartridge into the chamber with an easy movement, then reholstered the automatic.

Erika was off the phone. "Our cab will be outside in five minutes."

"Then let's get moving," I said. "We have an appointment to keep."

EIGHT

"I don't think I understand," Colonel Anatole Kotsikas said after he had received us in the entrance foyer of his large home. "Adelfia said this was to be a private meeting, General."

We had picked up General Kriezotou on the way because I knew that Kotsikas would turn us away if Erika and I went by ourselves. Kotsikas, a slim man who appeared to be a young fifty, stood in his khaki uniform, eyeing me suspiciously.

"Are any of the others here, Colonel?" Kriezotou asked.

"They are expected shortly."

"Good. Just give us a moment of your time," Kriezotou said.

Kotsikas looked at us silently, biding his answer. Although his military rank was beneath that of the General, he was the most powerful man in Greece at the moment. When the 1967 *coup* had taken place, the men who headed it had purposely kept the highest-ranking officers off the junta because the generals were associated with the favored upper-class.

"All right," he finally said. "Come into the study, please."

A moment later the four of us were standing in a circle in the center of the rather dark study. A servant pulled a drapery open, and the room was brightened. Kotsikas offered us drinks, but we refused.

"Colonel, I would like you to allow these two people to search your house before the meeting and to stay here through the meeting," Kriezotou said.

"Why?" Kotsikas asked. "What a ridiculous request."

"Listen to me. This meeting is a trap," the general said. "There is much to explain later when we have the time, but Nikkor Minourkos is not the man behind the recent attacks on you. There is a man named Adrian Stavros who is hiding behind Nikkor's name and who plans a bloody coup against the junta. You, Plotarchou and Glavani are to be assassinated here in your home this afternoon."

Kotsikas' face took on hard, straight lines. "I see."

"I suspect that Adelfia is to escape unharmed," the general added. "Nikkor, of course, will not be here because he has nothing to do with any of this."

Kotsikas looked out the window for a long time. When he turned back to us, he asked: "And this man and the girl?"

"They are here to help," Kriezotou said simply.

"How do I know that it is not you three who

have come to murder me?" Kotsikas asked evenly.

Kriezotou made a grimace.

"Colonel," I said quietly, "if I had come here to kill you, you would be dead."

His eyes stared deeply into mine. "All right. You are free to check out the house. But I am certain nobody has been inside who would want to harm me or my friends."

"Is there a basement, Colonel?" I asked.

"Yes."

"We'll start there," I said to Erika. "You and the general have a nice talk, Colonel. How much time do we have before they begin arriving?"

"I would say at least fifteen minutes."

"That should be enough." I turned to Erika. "Let's get started."

We searched the large basement quickly and found no bomb or explosives. We checked out the rest of the house and left the study, where the meeting was to take place, for last. We searched the study carefully. Although no bombs were discovered, we did find two electronic bugs.

"Incredible," Colonel Kotsikas said when I pointed out the devices. "I don't know when it could have been done."

"These people are professionals," I said. "Now you should believe me."

"Well, it's about time," Erika remarked. "Will they arrive separately?"

"Since they have been at the committee headquarters this morning, they could come together," Kotsikas said. "Even Adelfia might be with the others, despite the fact that they dislike him im-

mensely. After all, this is an alleged attempt at reconciliation."

The colonel's guess was right. Ten minutes later a big, black limousine drove up, and all three colonels were in it. Plotarchou and Glavani were older men, Glavani with white hair. Adelfia was about forty, an oily, obese man whose uniform seemed three sizes too small for him. He beamed smiles in every direction and spoke loudly of settlement and accord and was very surprised when, in the entrance foyer, I slipped the handcuffs on his right wrist.

His demeanor changed like lightning. The smile was gone, and an icy hardness appeared in the dark eyes. "What are you doing?" he cried.

Kotsikas and Kriezotou kept silent. I turned Adelfia roughly and cuffed his hands together behind him. His hard face was quickly filling with rage. "What is the meaning of this?" he asked loudly, looking from me to Kotsikas and the general.

"Mr. Carter here says you came to my house today to kill us," Kotsikas said coldly.

The other two colonels exchanged shocked looks. "Is this true, Anatole?" Glavani asked Kotsikas.

"It is absurd!" Adelfia exclaimed. "Who is this man?" Before Kotsikas could answer, Adelfia switched from the formal manner to one that allowed a barrage of hot Greek, spitting out the words like venom, throwing his head toward me regularly. I couldn't catch most of it.

"We shall see, Colonel," Kotsikas finally replied.

I grabbed Adelfia roughly by the arm. "You get to spend the next little stretch of time in the study," I said, "in case we missed some surprises in there." I looked over at Kotsikas. "The rest of you except Erika stay in the room across the hall until you hear more from me."

"Very well," Kotsikas said.

The colonels and General Kriezotou entered a living room on the opposite side of the hall from the study while Erika and I applied tape to Adelfia's fleshy mouth and tied him to a chair. I took a revolver off his hip and stuck it into my belt. Erika and I returned to the foyer with Adelfia mumbling insults at us from behind the tape.

"Now we wait?" Erika asked.

I looked down at her. Her red hair was pulled back in a twist and she looked very businesslike in her bell-bottom pants suit. She took the Belgian .25 from her purse and checked its ammunition.

"Yes, we wait," I said. I went to the open front door and looked down the long drive fringed by tall Lombardy poplars. It was almost a mile to the only road that passed the place. A perfect spot for a multiple killing. The question was, what had Stavros' twisted mind dreamed up? I had considered questioning Adelfia, but time was short and he was too scared of Stavros. That showed in his face.

Erika came up behind me and pressed her body against me. "We have so little time alone, Nick."

"I know," I said.

Her free hand, the one without the revolver, stroked my shoulder and arm. "When this is over, we'll hide away in Athens and just eat and sleep and make love."

"I don't think our bosses would appreciate that," I grinned.

"They can go to hell. They can spare us a few days," she said petulantly.

I turned to her. "We'll make some time," I assured her. "I know a nice little hotel where—"

I turned back to the door at the sound of a car engine. At the far end of the drive, before it curved out of sight, a black sedan was approaching. It had a light fixture on its top.

"It's the police!" Erika said.

"Yes," I agreed, slowly. "Do you think that Stavros bought off a precinct captain?"

"It would only require a few to go along," Erika speculated.

"Especially if Stavros sent a couple of his own men along," I added. "Come on."

We hurried into the room where the junta members and the general were waiting.

"A police car is pulling up outside," I said quickly to them. "This looks like Stavros' gambit. Are you all armed?"

They all were but Kriezotou. I gave him Adelfia's revolver. "Now just sit here as casually as you can, as if you're engaged in serious discussion. Have your weapons ready, hidden at your sides. Erika, get into that closet there." She moved quickly.

"I'll be just outside those French doors," I continued. "When they all get into the room, we'll try to take them. If any of you wants to leave now, you can go out the back way."

I looked at the tight-mouthed officers. They stayed in their place.

"All right. We'll try to avoid gunplay. Take your cue from me."

I went through the French doors just as I heard the front door crash open. A servant tried to stop the police, but he was verbally brushed aside. I heard them rattle the locked door of the study where Adelfia was tied and gagged, and then I heard the servant's voice again. It sounded as if there were several men. A brief moment later, I could see them clearly, they stormed into the living room. There were six—five in uniform and one in plain clothes. All the men in uniform had revolvers on their belts.

"What is the meaning of this?" Kotsikas asked, rising but keeping his gun hidden behind him.

The one in plain clothes stepped forward, a uniformed man with lieutenant's bars at his side. The plainclothes man was a Stavros bodyguard whom I had seen at the penthouse. The lieutenant was probably the policeman Stavros had bought. There would have to be real police. There would have to be a made-up, but credible story for the press.

"We did not expect you here, General," the lieutenant said. He looked around the room, probably for Adelfia. "You are all under arrest

for treason. We have evidence that you came here to meet with a Communist agent and to arrange for a clandestine agreement with international bandits." He seemed very nervous.

"That is absurd," Kotsikas said.

"You are all traitors," the lieutenant insisted loudly. "And you will be executed as such." I watched as the lieutenant drew his revolver.

The Stavros man gave a hard grin. "And the execution will occur here," he said in English. "When you resist arrest."

"We have not physically resisted arrest," Kotsikas reminded the younger man.

"No?" the Stavros hood questioned. "Well at least that is the way it will go into the police report. That is the way the people will hear it on the radio."

The lieutenant had aimed the revolver at Kotsikas. I guessed that in a moment all the policemen would have their guns out at a signal from the lieutenant. The Stavros man stuck his hand into his jacket and nodded to the lieutenant, who turned toward his men. I stepped quickly into the wide doorway, aiming Wilhelmina at the lieutenant's chest.

"All right, hold it right there."

The lieutenant stared at me with surprise etched across his face. The Stavros man had not quite reached his gun and only a couple of uniformed policemen had started to move their hands toward their holsters. Everybody froze and all eyes turned to me.

"Drop the gun," I ordered the lieutenant.

"And you, ease that hand out of your jacket carefully."

Nobody followed my orders. They were assessing what it would cost them to take me. The closet door opened on their left and Erika stepped out, her Belgian revolver trained on the Stavros man.

"I think you had better do as he says," she said coolly.

Frustration and anger were building in the faces of the Stavros thug and the police lieutenant as they stared at Erika. I watched their faces closely for a long moment, trying to guess their intent. Then all hell broke loose.

Instead of dropping his gun, the lieutenant aimed it at my chest, and his finger tightened on the trigger. I saw the lightning fast movement and started dropping to the floor. His gun went off like a cannon, and I felt a hot, searing pain rip through the flesh of my left arm. The slug went on past me and shattered the glass of the French door. I hit the floor and rolled behind a chair as the lieutenant fired again, the slug chipping up the wood floor near me.

"Kill them!" he was shouting. "Kill them all!"

At the same moment that the lieutenant had aimed his revolver at me, Stavros' man had followed through and had drawn his own gun. It was a shiny, black automatic, and he was aiming it at Erika's head. Erika fired at him but missed as he dropped to one knee. The shot struck one of the policemen in the thigh. The man yelled in pain as he hit the floor.

Two other policemen, crouching low, had their guns half-drawn. The wounded man and another cop dived for cover behind small pieces of furniture.

Kriezotou and the two visiting colonels were still frozen immobile, but Kotsikas had drawn his revolver from its hidden position and fired it now at the lieutenant. The man spun off his feet and crashed across a low table, splintering it as he brought it to the floor with him.

I was raising myself up to firing position. Stavros' man had just fired at Erika. He missed because he was still off-balance from avoiding her shot and because she had fallen into a quick crouch herself.

Several guns were blasting simultaneously. Kriezotou had finished off one of the policemen, and I got two more. Erika shot Stavros' hood neatly through the heart.

The lieutenant got ready for his second try at Kotsikas, but I saw the move and rose quickly to one knee. "I wouldn't do it."

The remaining policemen gave up the fight. Dropping their guns, they raised their hands above their heads. The lieutenant glanced at them, lowered his own gun, and dropped it to the floor. He looked at the bodies lying motionless, then at me.

"This is an outrage," he cried hoarsely. "You have obstructed legitimate police work and killed officers in their line of duty. You will not get away with—"

I brought Wilhelmina down across the side of

his head, knocking him down. He lay on the floor breathing hard, holding his head. "You need to acquire a little humility," I growled.

The colonels and Kriezotou were handcuffing the two officers. Erika leaned heavily against the wall. "Are you all right?" I asked.

"Yes, Nick."

"I am glad I trusted you, Mr. Carter," Kotsikas said. "We owe you our lives."

"And the assassination attempt has failed," Glavani added.

"I shall contact the commissioner of police and have a long talk with him about what has happened here," Kotsikas said, glancing darkly at the wounded lieutenant.

"I wish you would give me twenty-four hours before you do that, Colonel," I said. "The head of the octopus is still very much alive. Miss Nystrom and I are going after Stavros."

He hesitated a moment. "All right, Mr. Carter. I will keep this quiet for twenty-four hours. But then I must make my move."

"Fair enough," I said. "If we haven't found Stavros by tomorrow at this time, you can handle it any way you want."

Kotsikas extended his hand to me. "Good luck."

I took his hand. "We'll need it!"

NINE

We found Minourkos pacing the hotel room when we returned. It was clear that he had not given us much chance of coming back.

"The colonels are all right?" he asked, relief flooding into his face.

"Yes," I said.

"And Vassilis?"

"He is unharmed," Erika said. "We are very fortunate. It could have been a blood bath."

"Thank God," Minourkos said.

"We couldn't have done it without the general," I said.

"I am pleased that Vassilis gave a good account of himself. Have the surviving assassins been arrested?"

"No. I've asked Kotsikas to give us twenty-four hours until we've had a chance at Stavros."

He was silent for a moment. "I am not sure I agree with this secrecy. But I will go along for now. I too will keep my silence for twenty-four hours, Mr. Carter."

"I appreciate it, Mr. Minourkos. Now we have

our work cut out for us. We must go after Stavros."

"It seems bad to continue handling this yourself," Minourkos said. "This requires police help, Mr. Carter. I know some men I can trust."

"Like the ones who came after Colonel Kotsikas intending to commit mass murder?" I asked. "No, I have to have my chance at him, Mr. Minourkos. I can't trust that the police would be able or willing to bring Stavros to justice. Neither can my government. That's why I have orders to kill Stavros on sight. Those orders coincide with the ones Miss Nystrom has from her government."

"But it will be suicide to go up to the penthouse," Minourkos argued.

"Maybe," I said. "But maybe not, with what I know of the place. And what you know."

"When would you go?" he asked.

"This evening." I glanced over at Erika. "Is that all right with you?"

"Anything you say, Nick."

"About now Stavros is wondering why he hasn't heard from his man. I think the chances are that Stavros will wait at the penthouse until he is positive something has gone wrong. So he should be there this evening."

"You yourself spoke of the armed guards," Minourkos said. "You may not get past the corridor entrance."

"Possibly. But Erika and I will have a third man to help. I was in touch with my superiors before we went out to Kotsikas' place. A fellow

agent is in Athens on another assignment and will give us a hand."

"Three of you?" Minourkos asked. "The odds may be two or three to one against you, even if you get into the place."

"Mr. Carter thrives on long odds," Erika said, smiling.

I returned the smile. "Besides, I have a plan that includes four."

"Four?" Minourkos asked, confused. "If you are counting on me, your trust is misplaced. I do not even know how to fire a hand gun."

"Not you," I said. "On the plane here you mentioned something that stuck in my mind. You said that your murdered secretary Salaka Madoupas had a brother who looked very much like him."

"Yes," Minourkos said. "The poor fellow does not even know his brother is dead. He and Salaka did not see each other very often, but there was a great deal of affection between them."

"How much does he look like Salaka?" I asked.

"Very much. They were only a year apart. Some say they look like twins, except that Salaka was about an inch taller and somewhat heavier than his brother."

"We could fix that," I said more to myself than to Erika and Minourkos. "Does this fellow live in Athens?"

Minourkos looked at me quizzically. "Just outside of town in a small village."

"Call him and tell him about Salaka," I said. "Then ask him if he would like to help avenge his brother's death."

Erika looked at me. "Nick, do you mean—"

"If Stavros can come up with an imposter, so can we," I said. "Yianis Tzanni isn't the only one who can speak for a dead man."

"A third Salaka Madoupas?" Erika asked.

"That's right. Maybe, just maybe, he can get us into the penthouse." I turned to Minourkos. "Will you call him?"

Minourkos hesitated only a brief moment. "Of course. And I will get him here."

Two hours later, just at dusk, Sergiou Madoupas arrived at the hotel room. He appeared to be a meek, timid man, but under the surface was a grim determination to help get the man responsible for his brother's death. I gave him elevator shoes and some padding and did a quick make-up job. When it was over, he looked almost exactly like the imposter I had seen at the penthouse. It was, after all, the imposter that Sergiou was impersonating in our scheme, not actually his brother. I wanted the men in the penthouse to accept Sergiou as Tzanni, the fake Madoupas.

When I was finished with him, I stood back, and we all took a long look. "What do you think?" I asked Minourkos.

"He looks very much like Salaka—and therefore like Tzanni," Minourkos said.

Our own imposter grinned uncertainly at me. "You have done a good job, Mr. Carter," he

said. His voice was very much like Tzanni's and his English had about the same quality.

"I think we'll make it," Erika said.

An hour later we pulled up at the Apollo Building. It was the dinner hour in Athens, and there was almost no traffic on the city streets. The building itself was dark except for the lobby and the far-off twinkling lights in the penthouse. We sat in the rented black sedan for about ten minutes, and then a tall man appeared around the corner of the building. He walked directly to the car and got in beside me in the front seat. Erika and Sergiou were seated in back. Minourkos had been left at the hotel.

"Hello, Carter," the tall man said. He looked at the other two and his eyes lingered on Erika.

"Anything happening?" I asked.

"Not a thing. Nobody in or out since I got here." He was Bill Spencer, my AXE colleague. He was new to the agency, and I had met him before only briefly. Hawk had assured me on the phone, in our brief conversation earlier, though, that Spencer was a good man. He had been watching the special elevator to the penthouse through the glass exterior of the building for almost three hours, according to my instructions.

I introduced him to Erika and Sergiou. "We get in by the service door to the lobby," I said, "with this key. Sergiou goes first, and we act as if we own the place. If we get upstairs, we operate as I outlined earlier. Anybody have any questions?"

There was a pensive silence in the dark car. "All right," I said. "Let's get it over with."

The four of us climbed out of the black sedan and walked in a tight knot to the front of the building. At the left of the main entrance was a locked glass service door. Sergiou stuck the key that Minourkos had given him into the stainless steel lock and turned it. In the lobby, the guard at the elevator turned toward us with a puzzled look.

Sergiou entered first, and we followed. I found myself wondering whether we would really catch Stavros by surprise. He should be pacing the floor, waiting to hear what happened at Colonel Kotsikas' home. I hoped he had not sent a squad of his own men out there to investigate. There was also the possibility that he had tried to call Paracatu in the last day or two and had found that he could not reach anybody there. Not being able to get hold of anybody at the jungle plantation would tell Stavros that something was wrong.

We reached the guard at the elevator. He was looking at Sergiou oddly.

"Where have you been?"

"These are members of the press," Sergiou said, acting out his new role. "They have heard of a terrible massacre of junta colonels that took place just a few hours ago. The police reported the tragedy to them. They want a short interview to learn Mr. Minourkos' views on this dreadful event, and I will speak to them upstairs."

I felt Hugo the stiletto on my right forearm and wondered if I would have to use it. If the guard had been on duty for a while, he would know Tzanni had not left the building.

"All right," he said. "I'll get the elevator."

The elevator was upstairs at the penthouse. He rang for it, and it slowly began its descent. It seemed like an eternity before it arrived on the main floor, but the doors finally slid open. The same elevator operator who had taken me up and down previously was on duty. We got aboard while the operator stared openly at Sergiou. The doors closed behind us, but the operator did not push the button to take us up.

"I didn't know you were out of the building," he said to Sergiou, eyeing us warily.

"Well, now you know," Sergiou answered testily. "I left to meet these newspaper people. Take us upstairs. I am giving an interview."

The man studied Sergiou's face carefully. "I will just make a call upstairs first," he said.

"That is not necessary!" Sergiou complained.

But the operator had stepped to the communications panel at the side of the car. I nodded to Spencer, and he stepped closer. He pulled his Smith & Wesson .38 and the other man saw the movement. He turned just in time to receive the muzzle of the gun across the temple. He gasped and slid to the floor.

Erika stepped to the controls. "Take it up," I said.

On the way up to the penthouse, we moved the limp form of the operator into a corner of

the elevator where it wouldn't be readily seen when the four of us emerged. A moment later the doors opened on the penthouse corridor.

As I suspected, there were still two men on duty. One of the two was the blond thug I had met previously. These were gunmen, and I did not want to play games with them. The blond rose from the table at the entrance to the penthouse while the other one remained seated. Both looked at Sergiou as if they were seeing an apparition.

"What the hell—" the blond one exclaimed. "What goes on here?"

Sergiou captured the blond thug's attention while Spencer went over to the dark-haired one at the table. The man rose slowly to face Spencer.

"I have given permission for an interview with these men," Sergiou said.

"How did you get out of the penthouse?" the blond asked.

I stepped around beside him while Sergiou answered. Spencer stood close to the dark man. Erika covered us both with the little Belgian revolver hidden behind her purse.

"Don't you remember my leaving?" Sergiou asked indignantly. "It was just about an hour ago. I told you that—"

No further explanation was necessary. Hugo slipped into my palm soundlessly. I grabbed the blond man with my left hand and pulled him to me while he was off-balance. I made a quick pass

across his throat with the knife hand. Red spattered onto Sergiou's shirt and jacket.

The dark man went for his gun, but Spencer was ready for him. He pulled an ugly-looking garrote from his pocket and looped it quickly over the thug's head, then pulled hard on the crossed wire with the two wood handles. The man's hand never reached his gun. His eyes went wide, and his mouth popped open as the wire bit through flesh and arteries down to bone. More blood sprayed onto the thick carpet at our feet as the thug jumped and twisted in Spencer's grasp for a moment, his legs kicking at the air. Then he joined his comrade on the floor.

Erika loosened her grip on the trigger of her revolver. Sergiou looked at the corpses, white-faced, as I wiped the blade of Hugo on the blond's jacket. Spencer nodded to me, abandoning the garrote now deeply imbedded in the other man's neck, and moved to the door of the penthouse. I kept Hugo in hand, and Spencer pulled out a special pistol he had mentioned to me earlier. It had been supplied by Special Effects and Editing—an air gun that shot darts. The darts were tipped with *curare*, a quick-acting poison that AXE had borrowed from the Indians of Colombia.

Sergiou had regained his composure. He went to the door and inserted another key that Minourkos had given him and unlocked the heavy door with it. He looked at me, and I nodded. He pushed the door open silently and stepped aside, since he wasn't to enter the pent-

house. He wasn't equipped to help in that phase of the assault.

We all three stepped quickly through the doorway, fanning out as we went. Erika held the revolver well out in front of her, ready to fire, but she was just a back-up gun. I didn't want to alert anymore of Stavros' people than was absolutely necessary before we found Stavros himself.

It would have been perfect if Stavros had been in that big living room at the entrance. That would have ended the whole thing very quickly. But, instead, we found the tough Hammer sitting on a long sofa, his back to us, a glass of brandy in his hand. I saw the holster straps from where I stood. He was still armed—a dangerous man.

There was no evidence of life down the interior hallway that led to the bedrooms, but there was the sound of voices from the well-lit office. I was just about to start toward Hammer's back when suddenly two men came from the office into the living room. One was a thick-set gunman with an automatic in a shoulder holster, and the second one was the other fake Madoupas, Yianis Tzanni.

They stopped short when they saw us, and both gazed saucer-eyed at Sergiou. The two imposters stood staring at each other for a brief moment, while Hammer turned to them and saw the looks on their faces. In another split-second, the thug with Tzanni was going for his gun.

Spencer aimed the dart gun and fired. There

was a dull popping sound in the room, and a moment later a black metal dart stuck out of the man's neck, just beside the Adam's apple. His jaw began working silently as Tzanni stared at the black object, horrified. Hammer had begun turning and drawing his gun in one cat-like motion.

His eyes focused on me first, and I saw the menace in them as his hand found the gun in his holster. I dropped to one knee and simultaneously swung my arm in an underhand loop, releasing the stiletto. It sliced through the air as silently as a striking snake and hit Hammer in the chest beside his heart. The blade thudded into his body audibly and sank to the hilt.

Hammer's ugly eyes, exposed to me for the first time, since he wasn't wearing the blue-tinted sunglasses, stared hard at me for a moment, incredulous that I had managed to kill him so swiftly. He looked down at the stiletto where crimson seeped from his shirt. He took hold of the knife as if to pull it out, then raised the gun in his hand toward me. But he was dead. He fell face down on the sofa, his long hair covering the bewildered expression on his face.

The other gunman had just stopped twitching on the floor. Tzanni turned to run back into the office, but another dart from the air gun stopped him, catching him high in the back. He grabbed wildly at it, was unable to reach it, and then fell headlong into the doorway to the office, flailing there for a moment, then going limp.

"You should have saved him," I said quietly to Spencer.

I walked over to the doorway and saw that there was no one else in the office. I turned back to the others. I motioned toward the corridor leading to the bedrooms, and Spencer preceded me to it. Erika followed after me.

We explored the rest of the place. Another living area, bedrooms and kitchen. We found a gunman eating a sandwich in the kitchen. That is, Spencer found him first. I came in just as he fired the air gun again. He was damned eager with that thing, much the same way Zach had been. The man was hit in the side as he drew a long Welby .32 revolver. The poison didn't work as fast on him for some reason, and he managed to get a shot off. The gun roared in the confines of the room and hit Spencer just under the ribs, throwing him back against the wall. I grabbed a chair and slammed it into the gunman's face just as he was aiming the revolver at me. The chair crashed into him and splintered against his face. The gun went off into the ceiling, and the man hit the floor on his back, losing his weapon. Spencer, grunting against the wall, aimed the air pistol again.

"Hold it, damn it!" I yelled at him.

"What for?" he asked thickly. "The bastard got me."

He aimed the gun again. I slammed the back of my fist into his face, and his head hit the wall. I then chopped down at the gun so that he lost

it. It clattered on the tile floor of the kitchen, and he looked at me, stunned.

"I said hold it," I growled.

Our eyes locked together for a moment, then he lowered his, grabbing at the wetness under his ribs. It looked like a simple flesh wound, but that wasn't my big concern right now. I went and knelt over the gunman. His eyes were open, and his body was still fighting the poison. He was one of the rare cases that have natural immunity to certain toxic chemicals, which, although not complete, was making the *curare* kill him slowly rather than instantly. I was glad it was. Maybe I could get some answers.

Erika came into the kitchen just at that moment, her revolver still unfired, "He isn't here," she said.

I grabbed the failing thug by his shirt front and shook him. "Where is Stavros?" I demanded.

The man glared up at me. "What's it to you?" He was another of Stavros' American fanatics, but his hair wasn't as long as Hammer's.

I pulled the Luger from its holster and held it up against the thug's left cheekbone. "If you tell me where he is, I'll see that you get to a doctor in time to save you." That was a lie, of course. "If you refuse, I'll squeeze this trigger. Now."

He looked into my eyes and assessed what he saw. "Hell, okay," he said thickly. The poison was already getting him. "If you'll really save me."

I nodded.

"He went to Mykonos."

I exchanged glances with Erika. The island of Mykonos was one of the two places where Stavros had been building his elite rebel corps. "Now level with me," I said, pushing the Luger tighter against his face. "Did he get word on the colonels?"

The thug sneered at me, then his face was wracked with a sudden pain. "Tzanni called Kotsikas' home. One of the cops answered. Said the lieutenant and our men were okay, and—that the colonels were dead."

"What the hell?" Spencer exclaimed.

Spencer was surprised by the answer, but I wasn't. Colonel Kotsikas had thought fast when the call came and had put one of the policemen on the phone. Kotsikas figured that if he didn't give the penthouse the false message, Stavros would be on his way out there with his own men. Kotsikas hadn't had time to coordinate with us, so went ahead and did what seemed best. It was smart thinking—but the colonel could have had no way of knowing that the answer he forced the cop to give would free Stavros to leave the penthouse before we got there.

"Why would Stavros go to Mykonos?" I asked the dying gunman acidly. "To review the troops?"

Another spasm of pain clutched at him. "Get me a doctor," he gasped.

"Talk first."

He whispered the words. "He called both camps. He wants the troops brought to Athens. The commander at Mykonos said something

about not moving his troops until he heard from Minourkos. Stavros was—very angry with him. He flew there to take personal command.”

I rose. The man stiffened and shuddered. His face was already turning blue.

“Let’s get out of here,” I ordered. I turned to Spencer. “You stay here.”

There was resentment in his voice. “I’m wounded, Carter.”

I examined him. It was only a flesh wound and involved nothing vital. “You’ll be all right,” I said. “Stuff a bandage in that and call Hawk from here. Tell him the latest developments. I’ll have Minourkos get a doctor to take care of your wound. Any questions?”

“Yes,” he said. “Why don’t you want me with you at Mykonos?”

“You need a little seasoning, Spencer. You’re not going to get it all on this case. Stavros is too important to AXE.”

“Shall I tell that to Hawk?” he asked sourly. “He recommended me for temporary duty on this assignment.”

“Tell him whatever you like.” I turned to the door, holstering the Luger. “Come on, Erika.”

“What do you expect me to do, just wait until I hear from you?” Spencer asked.

I stopped and thought about that a moment. “At breakfast time tomorrow you can leave. It will be too late for the newspapers to pick up the story. Let Minourkos call the police and tell them everything. Call Colonel Kotsikas and have him back up Minourkos. I’ll be on Myk-

onos by then and will have found Stavros if he's there. It will be too soon for him to have received any news of what has happened here and at Kotsikas' place."

"What about Sergiou?" Erika asked.

"We'll send him home," I said. "He's done a good job, and he can go back to his family now."

"Carter," Spencer said.

"Yes?"

"I'll do better next time."

I looked at him. "Okay," I said. "Let's go, Erika. We have a *vulture* to catch."

TEN

The harbor of Mykonos lay like a massive cut sapphire in the early morning sun. It was an almost completely closed harbor with small fishing boats and launches inside and two large cruise ships anchored outside the sea wall. Ships didn't dock at Mykonos. Passengers had to climb down an uncertain gangplank, luggage in hand, to a bobbing launch that took them to shore in small groups.

Erika and I hadn't experienced that brief adventure. We had arrived at the new airport across the island just an hour previously and had taken a bumpy bus ride over primitive roads to the village. I sat now at a waterfront café under a sailcloth canopy, perched on a straight yellow chair, watching a half dozen mustachioed Greek sailors guide a newly painted fishing boat into the water just fifteen yards away. Curving away from me in either direction was the waterfront, a line of whitewashed buildings housing cafes, shops, and small hotels. I took a sip of Nescafé, the Greeks' token tribute to American coffee, and watched an old man in a straw hat selling

grapes and flowers pass the place. In this atmosphere, it was difficult to remember that I was here to kill a man.

Erika wasn't with me. She had disappeared down the maze of whitewashed streets just off the waterfront to find an old lady whom she had known from a stay on Mykonos a couple of years before. If you wanted information of any kind on Mykonos, you went to the dark-haired, black-shawled old ladies who rented out rooms in their homes to visitors. They knew everything. Erika had gone to find out about the military camp on the island and to find out where the commander of this camp might live, for we would probably find Stavros there.

I was just finishing the Nescafe when Erika came swinging along the stone walk before the cafe, dressed in a yellow slacks outfit, her long red hair pulled back with a yellow ribbon. It was still difficult for me to understand why a beautiful girl like Erika would become involved in my world. She should have been married to a rich man with a villa and a long white yacht outside Tel Aviv. She could have had all that with her looks. Maybe she didn't know it. Or maybe yachts were just not her style.

"You look like a tourist, Nick," she smiled as she sat down beside me. "Except for the jacket and tie."

"Give me another hour," I said. "What did you find out?"

She ordered a cup of hot tea from the waiter, and he left. "It was a good thing I went alone.

Maria was very reluctant to talk at first. These islanders are very distant with strangers and any person who doesn't live here is a stranger."

"What did she have to say?"

Erika began to speak, but had to wait until the waiter left her tea. When he was gone, she spooned a little sugar into the cup from an open bowl. "There is a camp near Ornos beach, and only a couple of islanders have been inside. The commander resides in a rented villa near the camp. His name is Galatis. One of the two local taxi drivers took two Americans to the Rhenia Hotel just at the edge of the village. Later the same man drove them to the villa of Galatis."

"Excellent intelligence work, Miss Nystrom," I said. "Come on, let's visit the Rhenia."

"I just sat down," she complained. "I still have a half cup of tea."

"I'll get you another cup later." I thrust a few drachmas onto the small table.

"Okay," she said as she hurriedly sipped some more tea and then rose to follow me.

We walked along the waterfront past the cafes and a small band to an open square where busses to outlying points stopped. The post office and the harbor police headquarters fronted the square, and there was a tarnished bronze statue of an ancient hero. We passed this square and turned off the waterfront into a short block and soon arrived at the Rhenia. It was a multi-level hotel built on a hill with an almost-tropical garden in front.

The slender young man at the reception desk

was quite cordial. "Yes, two Americans checked in yesterday. Are they friends of yours?"

"What are their names?" I asked.

"Let me see." He took a register from under the counter and thumbed it open. "Ahh. Mr. Brown and Mr. Smith."

"Yes. They would be our friends," I said. "What room are they in? We would like to surprise them."

"They are in 312. But they have left already. They mentioned returning for lunch at the hotel before noon."

We checked the room anyway. I knocked on the door and then let myself in with a Lock-picker's Special supplied by the Special Effects boys. We closed the door behind us and looked around. Both big beds were still unmade, and there was a bottle of scotch half gone, sitting on the night table. Stavros was not much of a drinker, so I figured it was the gunman he had brought with him who had drunk the liquor.

Besides the scotch and a few cigarette butts, there was nothing else the two had left behind. Stavros had probably brought no luggage. What he had to do wouldn't take long. He had to inquire about that phone call from a man identifying himself as Minourkos, and he had to test the loyalty of Galatis, the camp commander. Galatis' life was in immediate danger if he had obeyed Minourkos' instructions not to move until hearing from him further. Since Stavros had arrived yesterday, Galatis might already be dead.

"We'd better get out to the villa," I said.

"I'm with you, Nick."

After a half hour search, we finally found a cab driver sipping an ouzo in a cafe. He didn't have any inclination to drive us to the villa until I showed him a wad of drachmas, whereupon he hunched his heavy shoulders and led us to the cab. It was a beat-up 1957 Chevrolet with most of the paint gone and cotton stuffing protruding from the upholstery. The cabby started the old engine, which emitted a loud belch just as we drove away.

Most of the drive was over a badly paved road along the rocky coast of the island where sheer cliffs dropped off into the Aegean Sea. When we were almost at Ornos beach, the driver turned into a pocked gravel road toward the camp and the villa. We got only a glimpse of the camp, green buildings crouching in the distance, as we passed a high, barbed-wire fence. We turned away from the fence onto a long drive that led toward the villa. When we reached the tiled-roof house, I asked the cabby to wait, and he seemed very content to do so.

We were ready for anything when I knocked on the ornate wooden front door. Erika had the Belgian revolver hidden behind her purse again, and this time she hoped to use it. She stood coolly beside me at the door, waiting. I had put the Luger into the side pocket of my jacket, and my hand was in there with it. A servant, an elderly Greek, opened the door.

"*Kali mera*," he greeted us. He continued in Greek. "You wish to see the commander?"

"Excuse me," I said, gently moving him aside. Erika and I moved into a large living area with one glass wall overlooking a hillside of trees.

"Please!" the old fellow protested in English.

We went from room to room, cautiously, finally meeting back in the big room. Nobody was there.

"Where is the commander?" Erika asked the old man.

He shook his head violently from side to side. "Not at villa. Away."

"Where?" I asked.

"Go with Americans. To camp."

"*Efharisto*," I said, thanking him.

We went out and climbed back into the cab. "Take us to the military camp," I told the driver.

"What will we do when we get there?" Erika asked.

The cab pulled away from the house and started back along the gravel drive. "I'm not sure yet," I admitted. "I just have a feeling we should at least take a look from the outside."

But we never got that far. When we turned back on the road that paralleled the fence and proceeded along it for a few hundred yards, I saw a place where tire tracks left the roadway and stopped near some scrub brush.

"Stop!" I ordered the driver.

"What is it, Nick?" Erika asked.

"I don't know. Stay here."

I got out of the cab and pulled out the Luger. I moved slowly past the tire marks toward the scrub brush. There was evidence of a scuffle near where the car had been parked. When I got into the brush, I found what I had feared. A tall, slim man lay behind a thick bush, his throat cut from ear to ear. I had apparently found Galatis.

I returned to the car and told Erika, and we just sat there for a moment while the cabby eyed us in the rearview mirror.

"Stavros must already have one of Galatis' subordinate officers on his side," I said heavily. "If we don't find Stavros, he'll have these troops in Athens tomorrow."

"We can't go into the camp after him, Nick," Erika said. "He would have a small army to defend him there."

"We'll return to the hotel and hope that what Stavros told them there is true—that he intends to be there by noon. We'll be there waiting for him."

At the Rhenia, Erika and I got to Stavros' room undetected. We locked ourselves in and waited. It was mid-morning. The beds had been made, so we didn't have to worry about the maids. I poured us both a short shot of the scotch, and we sat on the edge of a bed drinking it.

"Why can't we be here on vacation like the tourists?" Erika complained. "With nothing to do but visit the windmills and go to the beaches and sit at the cafes, watching the world go by?"

"Maybe we'll get here together some day," I

said, not believing it for a minute. "Under different circumstances."

Erika had removed the small vest that went with the slacks suit. She wore only a sheer blouse tucked into the slacks. She lay back on the bed, her feet still on the floor and her red hair spread in disarray against the plain green bedcover.

"We don't have much longer together," she said, staring at the ceiling. A small breeze came in through an open window, a soft sea breeze. "No matter how this all works out."

"I know."

"I don't want to wait for some possible future moment together. It may never come." She began unbuttoning her blouse.

I looked over at her. "Erika, what the hell are you doing?"

"I'm undressing," she said, not looking at me. The blouse was off. She unsnapped a small bra and whisked it away. I stared down at her.

"Do you realize that Stavros might walk in here at any moment?" I asked.

"It's only mid-morning." She had unfastened a catch at the waist of the yellow slacks and was pulling them down over her hips. There was only a wisp of panties underneath, a small piece of cloth that covered almost nothing.

I remembered, and my throat went dry. I remembered the sheer animal pleasure I had felt with her.

"Erika, I don't think—" I tried to protest.

"There's time," she assured me, moving languorously on the bed. I watched her body

move and stretch. "You said yourself that Stavros will probably be in conference with a replacement commander at the camp all morning."

"We can't be sure of that," I said as she unbuckled my belt. My pulse rate was up, and I felt the familiar gut reaction to the touch of her.

She pulled me down beside her and moved against me. My left hand moved of its own volition to a breast.

"How sure do we have to be, Nick," she breathed, her hand inside my clothing.

Well, what the hell, I thought. The door was locked. The Luger would be within easy reach. We would hear Stavros before he got inside the room. And I had the same feeling Erika had. This might be the last time.

I turned and let my eyes move over Erika's body and the mane of flaming hair that fell over her milky shoulders, and I wondered if there had ever been a more desirable woman than Erika Nystrom. Anywhere. Any time.

I kissed her, and her mouth was hot and moist, and there was an urgency in the way she moved her lips against mine. As we kissed, she undressed me, and I didn't stop her. Then we were lying on the bed together, and I was sliding the sheer panties down over her hips and thighs. She helped me at the end by kicking them off.

She lay on her back, her eyes almost closed, and reached for me. I moved over her and she pulled me close. We kissed again passionately, and she had hold of me and was caressing me.

When she guided me into her, there was a moment when her mouth opened in a gasp of pleasure, and then there was a low moan from her throat.

Her hips were moving against me, taking the initiative, demanding. I responded, thrusting hard into her. The long thighs left the bed and locked themselves behind my back, forcing me deeper inside.

And then the explosion ripped through us. It came sooner and with more violence than I had ever thought possible, making flesh shudder and tremble in its naked power and passing only after we had both been emptied of all the turmoil that had mounted inside us. We were left with soft ripples of pleasure that found their way into the deepest and most secret parts of us.

We dressed leisurely. It was still not late morning. I was beginning to fear, though, that Stavros might not show up. He might be at the airport waiting for a plane to Athens. He might have said he was returning at noon only to throw any pursuer off his trail.

It got to be eleven-thirty. Erika had another scotch, and there was a growing tension inside her that showed plainly in her face.

"I'm going to the desk," she said at eleven-thirty-five.

"What for?"

"Maybe he called and changed his plans," she said, taking a quick puff on a long cigarette.

"They might know something."

I didn't try to stop her. She was all knotted inside, despite the lovemaking we had earlier.

"All right," I said. "But if you run into Stavros, don't take him on yourself. Let him come up here."

"Okay, Nick. I promise."

After Erika left, I began pacing the room. I was getting jumpy myself. It was important that we get Stavros here. We had chased him long enough.

It was only five minutes after Erika had gone down to the hotel reception area when I heard the sound in the corridor. I drew the 9mm Luger and went to the door. I listened for a moment. There was another sound. I waited but nothing happened. Cautiously and quietly I unlatched the door. Easing it open an inch, I peered into the corridor. There was no one in sight. I stepped into the hall and looked up and down it. Nothing. The corridor had open archways to a garden beyond. I went and looked out there and again saw nothing. There was an exit to the garden area down the corridor about fifty feet. I went down there quickly and took a look around and finally gave up. My nerves must have been on edge, I decided. I returned to the partly open door to the room and entered.

Just as I grabbed at the door to close it behind me, I saw the movement from the corner of my eye, but it was too late to react. The crunching blow to the back of my skull sent a rocketing pain through my head and neck.

The Luger slipped from my hand. I grabbed at

the door jamb and held on as I fell against it heavily. I got a glimpse of the face before me and recognized it as the one I had seen at the penthouse in Athens. It was the hard, scowling face of Adrian Stavros. I made an animal sound in my throat and reached out toward that ugly face. But then another blow hit me alongside the head, and bright lights exploded inside. I was swimming in a sea of ebony, and there was no horizon line between the black sea and the black sky. It all closed in on me and merged into a swirling, dark mass.

ELEVEN

"He's coming around."

I heard the voice indistinctly, as if it were coming to me from another room. My eyes fluttered open, but I couldn't focus them. I saw three vague forms around me.

"That's right, open your eyes."

The voice was familiar. It belonged to Adrian Stavros. I tried to focus on its source. His face cleared up in my vision. I looked into the tough, hard-lined face with the receding, dark hairline and the icy cold eyes, and I hated myself for letting him take me. I looked from him to the other two faces flanking his. One belonged to a husky, dark-faced fellow with a bluish glaze over his left eye. I took him for a Brazilian bodyguard of Stavros. The other man was quite young and wore a khaki uniform. I guessed that he was the officer who would replace the executed Galatis.

"So," Stavros said in an acid-etched voice. "The window washer." He made a kind of laugh in his throat. "Who are you really?"

"Who are *you* really?" I answered, trying to

clear my head, trying to think. I remembered Erika and wondered if they had found her, too.

Stavros hauled off and slugged me with the back of his hand, and I noticed only then that I was seated on a straight chair. They had not bound me, but the Luger was gone. Hugo was still on my forearm under my unbuttoned jacket. I almost fell off the chair when the blow landed.

Stavros bent over me, and when he spoke, his voice was a leopard's growl. "I see you don't recognize me," he hissed. I saw the army officer glance at him. "Now you know the kind of man you are dealing with."

Yes, a psycho, I thought. A ruthless man who preyed on others. Now I realized why they called him *The Vulture*. I kept my mouth shut this time. He straightened, grabbed at his shirt front, and tore it open dramatically. I stared at the mass of scars across his torso, apparently from a fire. It appeared that they covered much of his body.

"Do you see this?" he snarled, his eyes sparkling a bit too brightly. "I got this in an apartment fire when I was a boy. My father took a lit cigarette to bed with him, the last of a series of wantonly negligent acts toward his family. But I survived, you see. Don't think I will go to hell, because I have already been there."

So that was the big missing part of the Stavros puzzle. The fire had snapped something inside him. It had burned out what he had left

of a soul, leaving only a charred core. As he rebuttoned the shirt, I realized why he stood so erect. His entire torso must have been board-stiff from the scar tissue.

"Now you understand," he hissed at me. "Now you will tell me who you are and what you are doing here on Mykonos spying on me."

The husky, dark-faced fellow beside him took a short length of something from his pocket, apparently a club, just in case I was foolish enough to defy Stavros.

"Is it the CIA?" Stavros' ugly voice came to me. "Did you make the call to Galatis pretending to be Minourkos?"

I had to spare myself or it would be all over. If Erika were unharmed at the hotel desk, as it appeared, she would soon be back up here. If I got lucky and she was paying attention, she wouldn't just walk into the room and fall prisoner to them. She would make a fight of it. I would have to be conscious to give her help.

"Yes," I said. "The CIA."

"Ah. The truth will out," Stavros said. "And you are here to initiate a *coup* against me?"

Stavros' eyes flashed maniacal hatred at me.

"Something like that."

"What are the details of this CIA plot?" Stavros demanded.

I hesitated. If I said too much it would sound phony. The husky man raised the club again.

"Wait," the young officer said with a thick accent. "We have learned certain techniques recently in Greece to gain the complete cooperation of

prisoners. But he will make too much noise to embark on such an interrogation here. We have to return to camp anyway. We will take him with us."

Stavros thought about that a moment. "All right," he said darkly.

They grabbed me from the chair. I wondered where the hell Erika was. She should have been back from the reception desk. Maybe they had found her after all. But I couldn't ask.

As they herded me into a waiting car outside the place, at a remote parking area from the entrance, I thought of making a try for an escape with the stiletto. If they got me to that camp, I would never leave it alive.

But there was no good opportunity to make a move with the knife. The husky man held a gun in my ribs, and I was flanked on the other side by Stavros. The officer drove.

On the way out of town along the cliff road, I kept thinking of Erika. It was hard to understand what had happened to her. She had known that she would have had to return to the room immediately when Stavros arrived.

We were out of town about a mile when we rounded a sharp curve and saw the stalled car just twenty yards ahead of us in the narrow road. I remembered that I had seen the car parked at the hotel earlier and had concluded it belonged to the management. The officer slammed on the brakes and the military car skidded to a halt a few feet from the other vehicle.

"What is it?" Stavros asked curtly.

"A broken-down car, it seems," the officer grumbled.

"Well, get it out of the way," Stavros commanded.

On the right side of our car was the cliff and on the other side was a steep bank of rock. The officer got out on the left side and warily started toward the car that blocked the road. Stavros, sitting on my right, opened his door on the cliff side and stood on the pavement watching. I was in the car alone with the husky man who held the gun at my side.

"Shove it over the cliff!" Stavros ordered from beside our vehicle.

"I will try," the officer said.

Those were his last words. As he paused beside the other car, I saw Erika's head pop up over the cliff. She had obviously been listening outside the hotel room and heard them decide to take me to the camp. She had stolen the hotel car and beaten us to the road.

"Look out!" Stavros shouted to the officer as he saw Erika aim her revolver at the man.

The Greek turned as Erika's gun barked. A small hole appeared on the officer's forehead. He stumbled backward and crashed against the other car as Erika swung her gun to Stavros. He was drawing a gun of his own and I admired Erika for getting the officer first, for I knew how she wanted Stavros. She beat Stavros, and her gun barked out again and hit him.

The husky man beside me in the car had kept

his gun trained on me, confused about what to do first. Finally when Stavros was hit, he decided to finish me off first and then go for Erika. I saw his finger whiten on the trigger of his revolver. I swung my arm outward and hit at his gun hand, and the weapon discharged, breaking window glass beside me. The stiletto was in my palm. Keeping the gun hand at bay, I shoved hard with the knife and felt it go in under his arm. It was over for him.

Stavros had been hit in the shoulder, but it was just a flesh wound. He dropped to the ground and was returning Erika's fire as I jumped out the far side of the car. Keeping down low and using the vehicle for cover, I headed for the other car with the gun in hand. Stavros had forced Erika down behind the drop-off again. I wanted to get a clear shot at him from a place where he would least expect it for he thought I was still a prisoner.

As I reached the other car, though, Stavros saw me. He fired two shots, and the slugs kicked up chips of asphalt beside me. I dived to the corner of the car and got out of his line of fire. In the next moment, Stavros was back inside the military vehicle. Erika's head popped back up from the rocky drop-off, and she fired a shot into the car but missed him. Stavros was behind the wheel. The engine roared into action.

I stood up and took a shot at him. Suddenly the car lurched forward and came right at me. He was trying to pin me against the other car. I fired one wild shot and dived away from the on-

rushing vehicle. It crashed loudly into the other car. I lay very near the impact, covering my face and hoping the rending metal didn't slice into my flesh. Stavros spun the wheels in reverse and did a tight turn away from the impact site. He was heading back to town. In another split-second he was underway. I took careful aim, hit a tire and blew it, but he kept going. Erika fired two shots, the slugs whined off the metal of the car and missed Stavros.

"Damn!" I heard her yell.

I got up and pulled the door of the smashed car open. It fell off in my hands and hit the pavement. I climbed in and tried to start the vehicle. On the third try it was running.

Erika met me at the car as I put it in gear.

We roared down the road after Stavros. We kept him pretty well in sight until we got into town, then we found the car abandoned near the waterfront. We piled out and looked the car over.

"He can't be far from here," Erika said. "I'll take a look down by the cafés."

"All right. I'll take a look at the boats. Be careful."

"You too, Nick," she said.

She started down the walk toward the cafés. There were a lot of places to hide there. I walked out onto a small pier where a handful of tourists were waiting for a boat. I was just about to ask for Stavros, when I heard the roar of a motor launch. Then I saw him on the launch at the end of the pier. The boat was pulling away.

I ran toward him but I was too late. He was underway. I aimed the revolver at him, but didn't fire. Spotting a small, sleek boat near me, I hopped aboard with the owner who was standing slack-jawed watching the whole thing. I still had the gun out.

"Start it," I ordered.

He obeyed silently. The motor roared.

"Now get off."

"But—"

"Get off, damn it," I yelled.

He got off. In that second I was at the wheel and pulling away from the pier after Stavros. I looked back and saw Erika at the far end of the dock screaming out my name. I couldn't go back. I waved her away.

"Be careful!" I could hear her shouting.

I was sorry she couldn't be with me for Stavros was important to her. But circumstances dictated otherwise. I saw Stavros pass through the entrance to the inner harbor, making a clean, white wake behind him. There were small, choppy waves outside this protected area, and when I got there, my smaller boat began bucking like a bronco and spraying salt water in my face from the dark blue Aegean. It was clear that Stavros was headed for an uninhabited island that lay adjacent to Delos nearby.

My boat was faster than the launch Stavros had stolen, so, hanging onto my small craft desperately, I slowly gained on him. During this time I thought of Erika back there on Mykonos. There would be explanations to be made to the

police. But a call to Colonel Kotsikas would tell the authorities all they would want to know. They would probably be pinning medals on Erika by the time I got back. If I got back.

Suddenly I found myself within shooting range, but Stavros beat me to it. He fired two shots at me, and they chipped at the windshield of the small craft. Considering the way my boat was jumping around, it was quite a feat that Stavros hit anything. I pulled out the revolver and took careful aim on Stavros' silhouette. I fired and missed. I had only two shots left.

We headed into a small abandoned area of the island, and the water smoothed out. Stavros made a run for the crumbled remains of a hot, sun-bleached dock. I had seen him reloading the revolver on the way in, so he had the advantage in ammunition. As he pulled up to the dock, he fired two shots at me to keep me away. I turned the small boat in a wide circle, trying to out-manuever him. But I held my fire. I couldn't waste any shots.

Stavros was bent over in the launch, working at something. The launch was already docked. I figured this might be my chance and headed the small boat in again. Just as I got close enough to fire, Stavros popped into view and hurled an object at my boat. It landed squarely in my cockpit. I saw the fuse burning and knew Stavros had found dynamite. It was being used on Mykonos for cutting a new road at the far side of the island. I had no time to try to throw it overboard. The fuse was short. Jamming the revolver

into my waistband, I dived over the side and began swimming.

The blast ripped my ears and shook the hot air, rippling the water into big waves. Debris rained down all around me, but I swam clear. I looked back and saw the flaming wreckage on the surface of the water, black smoke rolling skyward.

I had been lucky. I continued swimming toward the shore adjacent to the dock area. Stavros saw me and fired two shots. The bullets plunked into the water just beyond me. He fired a third time and nicked my forearm. I swore under my breath. Even if I did reach shore, I might be weaponless because the cartridges in the revolver could have become waterlogged.

When Stavros saw that I kept heading for the shore, he turned and ran from the weed-overgrown dock. He was going into the flat, low area of the island just behind us, toward the remains of a half dozen fishing shanties that had been abandoned long ago. He apparently intended to ambush me there.

I climbed weakly onto an old sea wall that ran into the dock at a right angle. I looked across the open expanse before me, but didn't see Stavros. The hot sun began drying the salt water on me as I studied the terrain directly ahead. For a distance of perhaps three hundred yards, the ground was relatively flat except for scattered rock outcroppings and boulders that surrounded and made a backdrop for the brief line of crumbling stone shanties. Behind them the rocky hill

rose rather steeply toward the center of the island, and there was another building higher up on the hill. It was a two story affair with the roof and one wall gone, probably some type of communal structure.

I squinted into the glare of the sun and hoped to see Stavros, but he was keeping well-hidden. Pulling the revolver from my belt, I removed the cartridges and placed them on the sea wall. I flipped the cylinder open and peered down the barrel. Beads of water clung inside the metal tube, glistening in the reflected sunlight. Putting the muzzle to my mouth, I blew the barrel to clear it. The two cartridges I had so carefully saved might misfire when I was depending upon them. I had no other weapon, since the Luger was at the hotel and the stiletto was sticking out of the gunman's side on that road that led to the military camp. Erika would retrieve them, but that wouldn't help me at the moment.

Stavros wasn't sure, though, that I wouldn't fire the gun, otherwise he wouldn't be running. That was a small break in my favor. Accepting that as the best I had, I rose from the wall and started toward the cottage, revolver in my hand. If I showed the gun, I might make Stavros think I was willing to fire it, wet or not, and keep him on the defensive. But I hoped it didn't come to that.

I walked cautiously toward the stone cottages. Long grass grew everywhere, even inside the doorless and windowless skeletons of the small structures. The grass moved just slightly in the

warm breeze where I was. The sun seemed somehow brighter here than on nearby Mykonos. It and the warm breeze were slowly drying my shirt and pants, but my clothing was still stuck to my body.

I moved carefully through the long, brown grass. Two lizards, gray and prehistoric-looking, skittered over rocks to get out of my way. The place didn't have the smell of outdoors. The hot air clogged my nostrils and almost suffocated me with its odor of decay. There was a buzzing of flies all across the weed-choked field between the cottages and me and I saw Alexis Salomos in the back of my mind, lying by a twisted wreckage with the flies on him. Then I saw a movement up ahead near the closest cottage.

I rubbed a hand across my eyes and looked again. There was nothing visible there now, no further movement, but I felt Stavros was there. I sensed it, every bone of my body sending out warning signals.

I ran in a half-crouch to a chest-high boulder near the first cottage, freezing there, watching and listening. There was the constant sound of insects in my ears. I moved my hand on the boulder and put it on the back of the lizard. It jumped away startling me. Just then Adrian Stavros stuck his head out from behind the second cottage down the line and fired his gun.

The shot seemed to echo in the sticky air. The slug chipped at the rock near my right arm. In a moment a second shot hit the rock and scattered grit into my face. I spit and blinked it out of my

eyes. When I could see again, Stavros had disappeared. But I saw a movement of grass nearer to me, between the first and second cottages.

Stavros apparently had decided that I wasn't likely to fire the revolver. Instead of my stalking him, he was stalking me.

"The hunter becomes the hunted!" the voice came, followed by a low, spine-chilling laugh.

The hollow, crazy voice seemed to come from inside my head rather than from the cottages. I couldn't tell exactly where Stavros was from the sound.

"Then come and get me, Stavros," I yelled.

"Alexander," Stavros corrected me from somewhere. *"Alexander is the name."* This was followed by another laugh, a high, psychotic one that rippled and undulated on the hot breeze.

I heard a noise in a thicket beside the first cottage. I peered through the empty eyes of the crumbled windows and saw nothing. Then I heard the voice off to my right and a little behind me, out in the tall grass.

"The gun is useless, isn't it?"

I whirled to see Stavros standing behind me, in a completely different position from where I had heard the last sound. He might be insane, but he was still cunning. He pointed the gun at me and fired.

I dropped flat on the ground beside the boulder as he squeezed the trigger. The boulder was no longer between us. The slug ripped at my shirt sleeve and scratched my left arm. I rolled over once as he fired again. The slug puffed up

dust beside me. I aimed the revolver at him in desperation as he pulled the trigger a third time. He hit an empty chamber. He stared at me as I pulled the trigger on my revolver. It clicked dead.

Stavros' face changed, and he laughed that high, wild laugh as he slipped a cartridge into his weapon. I threw my revolver aside, dug my feet into the dirt under me, and leaped off the ground.

I hit Stavros just as he raised the gun toward me. He didn't get a chance to pull the trigger before I connected with him. The gun dropped as we both hit the hard ground, kicking and clawing in the tall grass.

I slugged Stavros hard on the jaw, and he hit the dirt on his back. But when I threw myself on him again, he still had plenty of frenzied strength left. He had somehow found the empty gun, and when I was on him again, he swung the barrel of the weapon viciously against my head. It connected with a glancing blow, and I grunted and fell off him.

When I was able to focus on him again, he was up and running toward the two story ruin on the hill behind the cottages. There was an old wooden door hanging awkwardly on one hinge, and this was still creaking gently when I arrived. Stavros had passed that way.

Slowly I stalked into the crumbling building. There was almost as much grass inside as outside in the field. Some of it had been crushed as Stavros had entered. But it humbled me to remember

that this man had been chased like this all his adult life and had managed to survive. As I rounded the corner of a crumbling wall I saw a flash of his wild-eyed face, then a rusty iron bar swung toward my head. I ducked low, and the bar brushed my hair and crashed into the stone wall near me.

"Damn!" I muttered. He had found a piece of junk left there by the island's last inhabitants. And again, he had an advantage over me.

I grabbed for the bar, but I was off-balance. He pulled me off my feet, and I lost my grip. A moment later he was swinging the weapon again. It descended toward my face and would crush my head if it connected. I rolled, and the bar brushed my right ear and thumped heavily into the packed dirt under me.

Again I grabbed the bar, trying to wrench it from Stavros' grasp, and we both lost possession of it. Stavros turned and raced up some crumbling stairs to the upper level of the structure where there was an edge of second-story floor. He was directly over me as I regained my feet. He grabbed a large piece of loose stone and hurled it down on me. It glanced off my shoulder and pain rocketed through it. I started up the stone steps. I was going to catch Stavros and kill him with my bare hands.

When I reached the top, another chunk of stone came flying at me. I ducked, and it went clattering down below. Stavros was standing on the back edge of the narrow floor section, the open side of the structure behind him. Despera-

tion had crept into his square face as he stood there scowling at me. He looked at the rise of ground behind the building, boulder-cluttered and stony. After just a brief hesitation, he jumped.

I saw him hit the rocks and roll. He grabbed at his ankle, and his face twisted in pain and rage. He crawled to a large, round boulder sitting precariously on a rocky ledge. The boulder was about three feet in diameter and had a smaller stone jammed under its front edge on the slightly inclined ledge of rock and grass. Stavros was reaching for the small stone to use it against me.

I leaped to the ground near him, and the impact stung the bottoms of my feet. I fell forward, but quickly scrambled upright, unhurt. Stavros was frantically wedging the stone away from the boulder. As I started for him, he pulled the stone loose with a superhuman effort and stayed there panting and waiting for me.

"Come on," he hissed. "I'll smash your skull. I'll—"

We both saw the movement at the same time. The boulder near him, with the supporting rock removed, began moving down the incline of the rocky ledge just a foot above Stavros. It seemed to stop for a moment while he stared at it in horrible fascination, then it moved forward and off the small ledge toward him.

Because of the heavy rock he held in his hand and because of his broken ankle, he couldn't move fast enough. I started to cry out a warning and

then realized the pointlessness of it. Stavros' face was twisted with horror as the boulder reached him.

"No!" he shrieked, when he realized, like a man who has fallen off a tall building, that inevitable death was only seconds away.

When the boulder reached Stavros, dwarfing him, he threw his hands up as if to stop its progress, but it had gained far too much momentum. It rolled slowly on his chest, swayed a moment and stayed there. When it first touched him, there was a sharp, piercing scream from his throat. Then it was choked off very suddenly, as if someone had turned off a radio.

Grimly, I walked over to where I could see Stavros' head and shoulders protruding from under the boulder. His eyes were open, staring unseeing at a white, hot sky. A hand jerked and twitched as a muscle died, and then he was lifeless.

TWELVE

Nikkor Minourkos and I sat under the cool canopy at the waterfront café and looked past the brightly colored fishing boats to the cobalt blue of the Aegean beyond. It was a pleasant morning, and we were enjoying it.

"Colonel Kotsikas and I have explained the entire matter to the authorities, and they are very grateful to you and Erika," Minourkos was telling me.

Erika had left the café for a few minutes and was a short distance away at a store buying an English newspaper.

"We must have caused some excitement here locally," I grinned, "until they got an explanation for all the shooting. I'm sorry about Galatis. He stood up to Stavros at an inopportune time."

"In every war, large or small, there are casualties," Minourkos said, finishing up an ouzo.

"One man can cause a lot of grief," I remarked.

"Stavros could have caused much more if you

had not stopped him," Minourkos said. "That is why I flew here to Mykonos to thank you personally. Kotsikas wants to thank you, too. He wants to present you and Miss Nystrom with honors at a public ceremony in Athens as soon as you return."

I shook my head sideways. "Thank him for the thought," I said. "But in my business you're not allowed to take any bows." I could imagine Hawk's reaction to a public ceremony.

"But there are ribbons," Minourkos protested. "May we at least send the ribbons to you and Miss Nystrom?"

I grinned. "Why not? Are you back in the penthouse now?"

"I am moving out of the place," Minourkos said. "This episode has made me realize that a man cannot and should not hide himself from the outside world. I believe I may still have much to contribute to my country, and I can accomplish the most by personal contacts. Which brings me to another reason for my flying here to see you."

I sipped my ouzo and looked over at Minourkos. I liked his face. He was a man you could respect. "What's that, sir?" I asked.

His dark eyes looked into mine. "I owe you my life, Nick. But more than that, I like you. I like the way you operate. I want you to come to work for me. I want a man to oversee my security system and to be at my side when I wish to talk to a real man. I need you, Nick."

I started to speak, but he put a hand on my arm.

"You would have a salary that I'm sure you would find more than sufficient. And I would give you stock in the shipping lines. I'm not going to live forever. You could end up very wealthy."

I clasped the hand on my arm. "I'm sorry, Mr. Minourkos—"

"Nikkor."

"All right, Nikkor. I'm sorry, but I can't."

"Why not?"

I took a deep breath and let it out. I stared out over the blue harbor to where a glistening white cruise ship in the distance was making its way toward us. "It's hard to explain," I said. "I tell myself several times a year that I'm insane to keep on in this work, that it's a thankless job, that nobody gives a damn. But people do give a damn. And, despite the bad pay and the long hours and the danger, it's a part of me. It's what I do best, Nikkor. It's where I'm needed most."

There was a long silence. A gull flashed its wings in the sun. Finally Minourkos spoke. "I understand."

A moment later, Erika was beside the table with a London paper. "I don't know how they can fly these here every day and charge so few drachmas for a copy," she said.

"Any mention of Stavros?" I asked.

She held the paper up so that we might read the headline: GREEK COUP THWARTED. There was a picture of Minourkos.

"Maybe this will raise the price of your stocks," I said, smiling.

I rose and put an arm around Erika. I was going to take a couple of days at the Rhenia with her, no matter how hot David Hawk got under the collar. I figured we were entitled to it.

"We're heading back to the hotel," I said to Minourkos. "Like to walk with us?"

He shook his head. "I think I know when two people want to be alone. I will just sit here until plane time, thank you, and watch that cruise ship come in. I always liked to watch a fine ship move gracefully into harbor."

"Then goodbye, Nikkor," I said. "Maybe our paths will cross again under better circumstances."

"Yes," he said.

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